

# The Lady of the Loch

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Summary: Hiccup has never believed in magic, but when he's enlisted in a fierce princess's attempt to change her fate, they both must fight against forces darker than they'd ever imagined. Post-HTTYD, Brave AU.

## 1. Prologue

### Prologue

The sound of the wind in the trees and the surf on the shore were barely distinguishable from one another; high above, the sun danced out from between the clouds, illuminating the rocky coast of Loch Na Keal, though it never seemed to burn away the fog that roosted on the peak of Beinn Mor. Tall, ageless pines and winding yews swayed nearly right up to the water, but in a rough clearing, the proud pennants of clan DunBroch snapped and lashed in the shadow of the new, growing castle on the cliffside. Among the hastily pitched tents, a young king was terrifying his dozen vassals with tales of battles overseas.

"And there I was," exclaimed Fergus, his broad shape aggravated by his far-flung arms and cape of dark fur. "Surrounded by four of the most wretched, godless Viking devils ye've ever seen. They bristled with pointy bits, had blood on their faces, in their mustaches!" For emphasis, he pointed one meaty finger at his own mustache, and the prickly beginning of a beard on his chin. "I had nothing but me bare fists, and as the head o' them raised his axe for the killin' blow..."

The circle of enthralled men were suddenly scattered by the appearance of their fierce, four-legged hunting companions; great grey deerhounds burst through their midst, howling at something in the loch. Answering barks rang out over the water as brown speckled seals, their coats shining, dove beneath the waves and out of reach.

Fergus guffawed at the dogs as they splashed, kicking up pebbles and mud in their enthusiastic pursuit of the seals. One of his men returned to his side, grinning up at the Bear King with the mixture of wariness and warmth that he stirred in all of his subjects. "Ye ken, Highness," said the man, a wiry spear-thrower named Bran. "Of the selkies, yeah? The women who wears a sealskin an' lives in the sea. Legend says if ye catch 'un, and hide her skin, she'll be yer wife until the end o' her days..."

The king snorted through his sizeable nose, clapping Bran on the back. "I ne'er put much stock in legends, lad," he said. "Don't trust anything ye can't get yer hands around."

Bran raised an eyebrow doubtfully, but didn't press. He didn't have time, as a large shadow passed over the camp and set the dogs to barking again, followed by a woman's high-pitched scream.

"\_Mor'du!\_"

Men began running pell-mell, tripping over hounds and each other as they scrambled for their weapons. Fergus looked skyward and saw a black shape appear between himself and the sun: a long and serpentine body with enormous, sail-like wings dove until it just brushed the surface of Loch Na Keal. A crooked maw opened up, black teeth gleaming as the beast let out a roar that chilled the clan of warriors down to their very bones. Great yellow eyes that exuded malice and contempt had their eyes on the men of DunBroch, and the dragon's claws reached forward, ready to snatch them up and deliver them to a terrible, painful fate.

Fergus bellowed, unsheathing the broadsword slung across his back, running to meet the dread beast as it landed on the shore, the ground shaking under its weight. The other DunBroch warriors were not far behind, a flurry of arrows bouncing harmlessly from Mor'du's flank as he gnashed his teeth to meet them. As his mouth opened, a spark seemed to roll forth from the creature's black throat.

"\_Get down!\_" Fergus bawled, turning sharply to the left and circling around as the dragon belched fire over the camp. The screams of men not fortunate enough to get out of the way were cut off by their untimely demise, but Fergus would not let their deaths be in vain. Long had the dread dragon Mor'du plagued the Island of Mull, and long had Fergus yearned to have the beast's head on his wall. The Bear King had faced Mor'du before, and he swore this time would be the last.

His men kept the beast busy as Fergus circled around, looking for a weak spot in Mor'du's impenetrable scales. Nearly as large as Castle DunBroch, and seemingly carved from glassy black stone, the dragon's body appeared to have no outward weaknesses. Broad wings were kept close to the ridged back, and sharp claws made it unwise to try and venture near. A long, whiplike tail whistled overhead, a spiked ball of bone at its end, promising to crush even the most armored Scot with only the slightest blow. It came down, rushing along the ground like a black river, forcing the wind out of Fergus as it crashed into his chest. Fueled by protective outrage, the Bear King hung onto it with one arm, the other hacking uselessly with his sword. The blood rushed in his ears, the sound mixing with the cries of pain and anger of his men as the beast cut a swath of destruction through their

ranks.

Over it all came another lady's shriek, though no women had accompanied Fergus and his entourage to the loch that day. Fergus held on tight as Mor'du swung around, looking for the source of the voice; a girl scrambled on the shore, evidently searching for something among the rocks instead of making her escape. Mor'du snapped his tail like a stalking cat, finally shaking Fergus free; the king went flying through the air and into the roof of a tent, bringing the canvas construction down with a riotous crash. His men rushed to assist him, but he yelled, pointing, "Not \_me\_, ye fools! The \_girl\_!"

Her long brown hair streaming in the wind, the girl had given up her search and was now trying to run into the loch, but Mor'du had blocked her path. His front claws circled her prone form, and though his face was far from human, he seemed to \_leer\_ at her. A grey forked tongue snaked out between his fangs, tasting her fear in the air.

He was interrupted, however, as rocks, spears, chairs, and whatever the warriors of DunBroch had on hand began to rain down on his body. Raising his head, Mor'du craned his neck around in time to see Fergus, his fists raised in a challenge, come running up and leap onto the dragon's head. Though he'd lost his sword in the impromptu flight, the Bear King had no fear in facing the beast unarmed. As he clung to the horns on Mor'du's snout, Fergus discovered the creature's weak spot at last: its eyes.

He punched the beast's glaring left eye, feeling it give away under his fist like a day-old platter of fish. Mor'du roared in pain, rearing onto his hind legs and gnashing his teeth. He whipped his head about, shaking Fergus's grip; with a yell, the man felt himself slipping, uncomfortably aware of the distance between himself and the ground. The fear, however, quickly turned to blinding pain as Mor'du caught him between his own saw-edged teeth.

Blood welled up and bones crunched in Fergus's left leg. The Bear King snarled, trying to pull himself back up; if Mor'du threw him now, it really would be over. But below, his men rallied to his aid, throwing ropes over the dragon's limbs and neck to try and keep him on the ground. It seemed to be working for an instant, and as the beast roared, he dropped Fergus a greatly reduced few feet to the earth.

Now unburdened, Mor'du reared up once more, snapping the ropes the DunBroch men held as he stretched his wings over their heads. For a moment, beneath the beast, day became night; then Mor'du was airborne, flying over the loch and toward the sea.

Fergus cursed under his breath; he had failed to kill the dread dragon once again. Laying on the ground, he could see the blue sky and clouds continuing on merrily, as though the battle had never happened. Soon, though, his view was blocked by his men, pushing each other in their eagerness to help him.

"M'lord!"

"Is he dead?"

"His leg! Get somethin' for his leg!"

The king sat himself upright, unable to think through the agony of his mutilated leg. However, one thought managed to make it from his muddled mind to his mind:

"The lass. Where's th' lass?"

His men took a step back, momentarily confused by their king's demand. But Bran was pushing a path through them, accompanied by the strange girl on the shore. Now that she was closer, Fergus-and all the men-could see she wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing.

Her limbs bore long, shallow scratches; Mor'du's claws had probably struck her in his flailing. Though she was pale with fright, her face and voice were steady as she knelt beside Fergus.

"Thank you, brave lord, for saving my life."

Fergus felt as though all of his pain had vanished; all of his rage at Mor'du's appearance and subsequent escape soothed away as the young woman touched his shoulder with a soft hand.

He found himself at a loss for words. The lady's gaze was a very solemn one, quite unlike any he'd encountered at DunBroch or abroad.

"'S nothing," he finally managed, aware of their large, rapt audience. Finally, frustrated by his own dumbfoundedness, he waved his men away and fumbled with the clasp of his cape.

"Here, lass, before ye catch yer death," he said, throwing the heavy bear skin about her shoulders. "And will you lot stop staring? Pick this mess up, we got ta get home."

Grumbling about the excitement being over so early, the warriors of DunBroch obeyed. Several were called to help their king to his feet-or foot, since the left one couldn't be saved. No one questioned that the young lady of the loch, who gave her name simply as Elinor, accompanied them to the castle. What became a real topic of conversation, however, was the fact that Fergus seemed unable to leave her side.

It amused the people of DunBroch to no end that a soft-spoken, upright young woman had at last tamed the indomitable Bear King. Elinor appeared to be just as in love with Fergus as he was with her, and their marriage came as a surprise to no one. She also proved to be as fearless as her husband when Vikings threatened the northlands; alongside clan DunBroch, the clans Macintosh, MacGuffin, and Dingwall gathered their men and marched to meet them. Queen Elinor held the castle together, aiding in the gathering of supplies, the repair of weapons, and the movement of forces.

Mor'du's absence during the conflict did not go unnoticed, and he still did not return when the Vikings had been routed and King Fergus came home. It was a relief to all of the DunBrochs, since the sound of small feet would soon be heard throughout the castle. Though Fergus still wanted to avenge his leg and assure the safety of his family once and for all, he didn't mind that the war with the dragon was over.

But he was wrong. It had only just begun.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN<strong>

I liked Brave a lot, but I wish there had been a bit more of all that dark, mystical Celtic/Gaelic mythology involved. So I'm writing this.

## 2. Chapter One

### Chapter One

\_Some years later, \_

The island of Berk was rapidly receding underneath beneath the beating of strong dragon wings. There were cheers and howls of laughter as the six teenagers were airborne at last after a long day of chores; even the implacable twins agreed that an evening dragon flight was a pleasure that had no equal.

Said twins were riding their Hideous Zippleback at the fore of the group, leading the others on one of many exploratory forays over the waters around Berk. While choppy, icy waters and rocky shorelines made it almost impossible for their fellow Vikings to ride their boats to the neighboring islands, the alliance with the dragons had finally allowed them to venture out into a larger world that they had nearly forgotten-and had nearly forgotten them. Stoick and the other village leaders had been glad to re-establish trade and communication between other Viking villages on other islands nearby, though their old cousins had nearly attacked them on sight. Dragons had that kind of effect on people.

But today they were not legates or ambassadors. Instead, the youngsters were left to be themselves, and were following Ruffnut and Tuffnut to an ancient shipwreck they claimed was overflowing with gold. Hiccup had given up his customary position in the lead to fly after them, followed by Astrid and Snotlout, and finally Fishlegs, on his long-suffering Gronkle. Toothless was seemingly restless beneath Hiccup, his wings giving a sharp slap against the air every once in a while, as though this easy coasting made him bored.

Hiccup was anxious too, but for other reasons. The group had been flying for what had felt like hours-certainly farther south than they had ever gone before. Already the sun had begun to slide toward the horizon, and while the summer days had grown longer, the nights hadn't grown any warmer. Glancing toward the choppy, endless waters below, Hiccup thought he could see the dragon's Nesting Island, its steaming spring pools empty of eggs and hatchlings until winter came around again.

Now looking up again, Hiccup could see that the bank of clouds directly before them had grown larger since they'd set out, a tell-tale grey haze of rain appearing beneath it and obscuring whatever lay in the distance. He called out over the roar of the wind:

"Guys! How much farther?"

The twins both looked back, and Ruffnut was the first to answer, not at all reassuringly, "Not far!"

Tuffnut shouted dryly, "She means we're lost!" He yelled and ducked as his sister punched at the air where his head had been, making their dragon squawk in irritation.

The rainclouds made Hiccup reluctant to continue; he looked over his shoulder to Astrid, who shrugged. She was less about the treasure and more about the joy of being out on Stormfly. Snotlout, however, urged his Monstrous Nightmare upward, to fly over the clouds, and Fishleg's Meatlug huffed in an effort to do the same.

Hiccup could feel Toothless's rumble through his limbs and shifted his left leg; the dragon's matching prosthetic extended, and they rose higher. They emerged into an alien world: like piles of the softest sheep's wool, the clouds reflected the blushing sky and sinking sun with a cacophony of pinks and oranges, giving no hint to the turmoil at the bottom.

But the peace of that evening did not last long. A fierce wind began to buffet them from the north-west, shaking up their loose formation and making their howls of delight turn into shouts of alarm. Toothless banked around a rising cloud with ease, but the others passed through, soaking them to the bone. They sputtered and coughed when they came out the other side, and Toothless halted, his wings laboring so that he could hover in place. He exhaled raspily in something that Hiccup knew was a laugh.

"\_Toothless\_," he chided quietly. Then, to the others, "You guys okay?"

They assured him that they were, though they were now a great deal less enthusiastic, and their dragons even less so.

"We should head back," Hiccup began. Ruffnut looked like she might object, but a glare from her brother and a whine from the dragon's head she rode seemed to have changed her mind. There was silence, save for the flapping of wings, as each of the teenagers looked about them and tried to figure out just which way \_back \_was.

The clouds now stretched in every direction, an amorphous, unpredictable landscape that offered no answers. It was growing darker by the minute, and soon the chill would settle in, turning the others' damp clothes into a real danger. They didn't have time to wait for the stars to come out-but with nothing else up here to guide them, Hiccup realized they would have to find something below.

The others seem to have reached the same conclusion, but Hiccup raised a hand to stay them. "You wait here, we'll go down and take a look."

"Be careful," Astrid advised, though her concern always seemed to come out like a threat. Hiccup flashed her a warm, crooked grin.

"A little water never hurt anybody."

With no more than a nudge from Hiccup, Toothless dove into the

clouds, the cold and moisture slapping washing over them most unpleasantly. The world was an inky grey as far as Hiccup could see-but he screwed his eyes shut as they continued down, feeling his stomach trying to rise up his throat. Then, quite suddenly, they were in the middle of the raging storm.

It was no longer a monotonous drizzle of rain. Lightning flashed and thunder seemed to crack right through them. Hailstones the size of Terror eggs stung Hiccup's face and the wind buffeted Toothless's wings, making the dragon snarl and fight to maintain his balance. It toyed with them like they were a toy boat on the angry sea, tossing them this way and that, until they could no longer tell which way was up.

Lightning lanced between the clouds; it was so close that Hiccup thought he could feel it singe his eyebrows. "Toothless," he shouted. "Toothless, we have to get out of here!"

The dragon gave him an answering shriek, but the growling, blazing clouds looked no more inviting than the white-capped water that churned beneath them. And still the wind blew, threatening to unseat Hiccup and seal both their fates.

"Come on!" Hiccup urged his dragon. There was nothing he could do but hold on with fingers that had become numb and slippery. Then, with a defiant roar, Toothless rolled over, Hiccup clinging fearfully to the saddle, and belched a flaming missile into air.

It blazed like a beacon, the force pushing back the clouds to create a slight tunnel, an escape. Pumping his wings, Toothless went for it-but it did not last long. Just as easily as it had parted, the storm collapsed on them again, worse than before. Now both dragon and boy were yelling with fright as blue-lightning flashed around them, searing after-images into their eyelids and making them deaf with thunder. Rather than have them shredded by the hail, Toothless hugged his wings close to his body, but the powerful wind still kept them aloft.

Though he was very certainly very terrified for his own life, Hiccup hoped that his friends hadn't gotten caught in the storm themselves. After all, he needed them to get back to Berk and bring help to find him once he and Toothless were safe somewhere on the ground-or pick up their bodies if they drowned.

As if picking up on Hiccup's thoughts, Toothless gave another shriek. Hiccup shouted, "I'm here! You're going to be alright!"

The wind lessened for an instant, and they tumbled downward. The lightning had become so frequent that it made it light enough to see-but it was not like any lightening Hiccup had ever seen before. It was more blue than white, and kept pace with them instead of flaring and fading out. But before he could figure out this odd, terror-fueled hallucination, Hiccup spotted a black mass barreling toward them out of the gloom.

"Toothless!" He helped to try and right them, tightening his grip on the saddle and pulling up. Toothless spread his wings, slowing them down-but not enough. He veered to avoid the mass, but it still smashed against his right side, sending them into a hard spin. More shapes, narrow and pointy, blasted past them. They seemed to reach

out and snatch at the pair, snagging on the dragon's wings and tail. Hiccup realized they were trees when a large and unforgiving branch broke their fall, causing them to somersault the last few yards until they smashed into the cold, hard earth.

### 3. Chapter Two

#### Chapter Two

Merida shrieked, laughing as the wind snatched at her cloak and hair. Its howling was nearly as loud as the pounding of the ground beneath Angus's huge hooves-her hooves, almost, because on days like these, it was hard to remember just where she ended and her trusty steed began. But they were both going to be in big trouble if they didn't make it home soon, and the princess was relieved when the land began to curve upward and the hulking mass of Castle DunBroch, silhouetted by a flash of lightning, rose above them. Behind it, the sky was a-roil with blues, purples, and oranges of the storm, reflected in the choppy waves of the loch. It was like the sky itself took joy in misbehaving and making a mess-a sentiment that Merida could wholeheartedly relate to.

They kicked up mud as they rode through the gate, eliciting cries of either welcome or dismay from the other residents of the castle. Though it had not yet begun to rain, the sky threatened to erupt at any moment, and Merida thought she could feel the first few icy droplets strike her cheek before she dismounted and guided Angus into the stables. The wind roared in earnest, though it was cozy inside, with the heavy smell of horses and hay. She brushed the burrs from her only friend's coat and untangled the leaves and branches from his mane, knowing she'd have to do the same for herself in a minute. Once she'd made sure Angus was settled with a hearty bale of hay, the redheaded girl made her way out and to the Keep, making sure to take the back door through the kitchen and helping herself to a platter of pastries along the way.

Rain lashed at the windows as Merida marched up the stairs into the Keep proper. Voices echoed along the castle's stone walls, guiding her to where her family was taking supper in the great hall. Her father was telling a story-she could tell by the way King Fergus's voice rose and fell in the dramatic pattern she'd memorized long ago. As she reached the hall, she could see the enormous round room illuminated by tapers along the walls, the table in the middle laid out with food. Her father sat at one end, gesturing wildly with a pheasant's leg in one fist. The triplets, her brothers, lined the side to his left, picking at their food as they listened. At the far end, to Merida's chagrin, was her mother, who seemed more occupied with a pile of scrolls and letters than her husband's old stories. Tiptoeing toward the table with her spoils in hand, Merida hoped she would be able to sit down unnoticed, but, as usual, her efforts were in vain.

"And where have you been, young lady?"

Merida was dumbfounded. Elinor hadn't even looked up from her papers, but still had the energy to chide her daughter. Fergus, however, faltered-he hadn't been paying that much attention, and the triplets giggled.



"Just out, Mum," Merida answered, rolling her eyes and setting down her "dinner" on the table.

"In this weather?" Elinor looked up to give her daughter a disapproving look. "You'll catch your death!"

Merida stepped away from the table toward the hearth. She did feel a bit cold in the extremities, but would never admit it. "I'm fine, Mum!" The fire crackled as she neared, and paced before it, warming her fingers as she pulled leaves from her hair. The room began to fill with the smell of burning meadowsweet, and Elinor scolded her daughter a second time.

"Not so close to the fire, Merida."

The princess turned on her heel and made a face, stomping to the vacant chair at the table as Maudie, the boys' nursemaid, approached with yet more letters in her hand. Elinor thanked her quietly, and Merida set to eating, free from reproach as the Queen read their contents. Harris, Hubert, and Hamish looked on enviously, their haggis untouched. Wiggling her brows, Merida passed a handful of scones their way under the table.

She almost didn't notice when her Mother called her Father's name, except that the former's voice was tinged with excitement. Looking up, she saw surprise on Fergus's face, stilled with his lips on a tankard of beer.

"Fergus," Elinor repeated, holding the three letters tightly in one hand. "They're from the Lords. They've all accepted!"

The Lords could only be her Father's three allies, Merida knew, but what did they have to do with the price of ham in the Hebrides?

Fergus looked equally confused, before clearing his throat and remembering himself. "Aye, is that right?" He glanced at Merida.

Merida felt a creeping sense of alarm at his furtive eyes. "Accepted... what?"

Elinor smiled at her, a rare enough event, then hesitated. "Well, dear," she looked at the letters, then back at Merida. "Your \_father \_has something to tell you."

Merida's head snapped around, and Fergus felt like his daughter could read into his mind, so intense was her gaze. "Well, uh," he began. "Y'know, there comes a time in every girl's life where she 'as to start thinkin' about her future..."

He was clearly not cut out for this. Pleading silently with his eyes, Fergus gestured toward his wife while he struggled for words.

The future was the farthest thing from Merida's mind most days, and any conversations regarding it were best escaped from as soon as possible. However, this didn't seem like it would be easy to avoid with excuses of tending Angus or chasing after the boys.

Elinor seemed to think the same, dismissing the triplets with a swift

nod. They let out three cries of relief and scampered out of the room, leaving a trail of crumbs behind them.

"You see, Merida," she said, quieting her husband with an upraised hand, her soft eyes focused on her daughter. "There's something important each of us must do with our lives. Sometimes we have to make..." Merida saw her mother glance toward the bow hanging from the back of her daughter's chair, and raised a hand over it possessively. "...sacrifices."

"Mum..." Merida said, trying not to be terrified and failing miserably.

"The Lords will be here to present their sons for your hand in marriage," Elinor said bluntly, setting the letters down at last. At each of their heads were the three emblems of the Lords' separate clans.

"\_Marriage!\_" Merida cried out in horror. "Da! You're not serious!"

Fergus gibbered, but Elinor remained as calm and collected as ever. "This is tradition, Merida. This is what we do to keep the people united."

"United? What do I care about unity?" Merida demanded, leaping to her feet, the table settings clattering. "I won't do it! You can't make me!"

Without waiting for a response, she stormed from the room, both her parents calling after her. She did not slow or turn around, instead racing up the stairs and corridors until she reached her own room.

The storm still raged on, thunder crashing as she slammed her own door. The fire in the hearth was in need of wood, but now she felt like she'd never be warm again. When she'd been smaller, she'd been scared of terrible weather like this, but now she sat with her head against the window, glaring into the night as the wind grew steadily worse.

\* \* \*

><p>Morning came with a grey, damp dawn. What struck Hiccup first was how quiet it had become, as if the storm from the day before had never happened. But as he stepped from the cave he and Toothless had taken shelter in, he saw that it had, indeed, really happened. Broken branches and churned-up mud were strewn about outside as evidence, and water dripped from the leaves of trees in a tame imitation of yesterday's rain.<p>

Hiccup squinted into the sky, which was still overcast but calm. Inhaling the scent of crushed pine needles, he wondered where they'd ended up-impossibly far from Berk, no doubt, since that would be their luck. Turning around, he called into the cave,

"Come on out, Toothless!"

The dragon obeyed, his great green eyes split by thin pupils that widened as he emerged into the day. He snorted and looked wary of

their unfamiliar surroundings, walking stiffly, like Hiccup, from spending a night cramped up in the gave.

With clothes still damp from the soaking, Hiccup felt cold, hungry, and hopeless. Perhaps with the weather cleared up now, they would be able to find their way back home-but as Toothless stood beside him, Hiccup's heart began to sink. At the end of the dragon's tail was a lone fin, the prosthetic nowhere in sight.

"Oh, no," Hiccup moaned. Toothless curled his tail around to eye it thoughtfully before looking back up at his boy, pressing his head against Hiccup's hand.

\_Now what? \_The young Viking had no idea where they were, and no way to get home. He'd have to fashion Toothless a new fin-out of what? If there were people here, it would be possible for him to trade for or earn the material he needed-but if there weren't they'd be doomed. There was only one way to find out.

"Come on," he repeated, beginning to walk in the direction he was facing. He couldn't see any signs of human habitation nearby, though he looked to the sky for smoke or even dragons. It was possible that his friends could come and find him-if \_they \_had survived the storm.

They walked through an alien forest, taking in the lichen-covered stones and moss-caked trees, the flowers of unfamiliar plants winking out from the green. The ground was uneven and rocky, making progress tricky with Hiccup's metal foot. Luckily, Toothless was there to help him keep his balance, and at last they came to an open area at the crest of a hill.

It was immediately recognizable as the place they had crash landed the previous night, if only because of the massive swath of churned up earth and grass that had cushioned their fall. Surrounding the hole were gigantic standing stones that Hiccup hadn't seen in the darkness-and while they were decidedly creepy looking, they also gave him hope. Stones didn't just get up and position themselves in a circle-someone had to move them. That meant there were people here!

"We might not be so doomed after all," Hiccup told Toothless, who rumbled. It was echoed by a similar growling from Hiccup's stomach, and the boy put a hand over it, grimacing. "But I guess we should find something to eat first, eh, buddy?"

The dragon nodded, raising his head to sniff the air. He was more of a hunter than Hiccup ever would be, so the boy let him take the lead as they left the hill, venturing back into the strange forest and away from the stones. If Hiccup had been the superstitious type, he would have thought that it felt as if the stones had watched him go.

\* \* \*

><p>No one had come to disturb Merida that night, and she rolled out of bed while the castle was still quiet. The fire had died down and the room had grown cold, but outside, the sky was calm, and curls of smoke were beginning to puff from the kitchen chimneys. The princess knew it was only a matter of time before Maudie came to rouse her for

breakfast, and a stern talking-to from her mother would soon follow. But she still didn't want to hear anything more about this marriage business-in fact, she hoped it had been a terrible, terrible dream.<p>

She crept from her room, down into the great hall. The table was bare, the chairs empty. She saw no one until she reached the kitchen, where a handful of women were hard at work. Their eyes downcast sleepily, they barely looked at Merida as she picked her way through them, plucking up a bag of apples and hard-baked bread. The bag went beneath her cloak, her bow slung over her shoulders, a quiver of arrows at her hip, and she was striding across the courtyard, not heeding the mud as it sucked at her boots and dress.

Angus breathed hard into her hand as she coaxed him from the stables, apologizing with an apple for waking him so early. He seemed to grow more excited, however, as she saddled him, and in a matter of moments they were out of Castle Dunbroch and across the bridge, racing into the forest without a backward glance.

\_I'm not running away, \_Merida told herself as the wind pulled at the hood of her cloak and sent the cape snapping. She was just avoiding her mother-and avoiding the problem, in the hopes that once she was back home it would have all blown over. \_Fat chance.\_

She and Angus knew the most of the forest inside and out, and she let him have his head as they galloped through thickets, leapt over logs and splashed through cold mountain streams. Merida squeezed her eyes shut and buried her face in Angus's streaming mane, made fearful by the realization that marriage meant giving up this freedom to do as she pleased.

How often did her mother go out riding? Except for affairs of state, never. The Queen certainly never raised a bow or a sword or even broke a sweat exploring the beautiful lands around the loch where they lived. Did she really expect Merida to be ready for that kind of life, even if she had wanted it?

Merida's shaking hands did not go unnoticed by her steed, who began to slow his running, until they came to a halt in a shallow ravine. When she realized they'd stopped, Merida sat up, blinking against the light that filtered in through the trees high above. Angus had lowered his head to a spring that bubbled at the ravine's lowest point, and Merida felt the dryness of her own throat. Dismounting, she crouched by the small pool and dipped her hands into the clear water and splashed it over her face.

Her reflection waved back at her, strangely solemn and shadowed. It only served to remind her how much unlike her mother she really was-while Elinor's brown hair flowed down her back, Merida's blazed more like her father's and brothers', wild and unchecked. Elinor's eyes were dark and somber, and Merida's bright. The girl's hands, cupped before her in the water, were lined with calluses from a lifetime with a bow, while Elinor's were soft and spotted with ink. Merida tried to imagine what it would be like, forced into Queenhood, made to read and write and manage and calculate endlessly, day in and day out, until the end of the world. That would be a fate worse than death. Wasn't there some way, some how, she could change it?

As if summoned by her concentration, a ball of blue light flashed

above her hands. Startled, Merida cried out, falling back on her behind, and the little light vanished.

For a moment, she thought she might have imagined it. "Did you \_see \_tha'?" She asked Angus, looking up at the horse, who snorted. Getting to her feet, Merida looked around and brushed the dirt from her bottom, wondering just what she had seen.

She did not have to wonder long, for another flash of blue from the corner of her eye brought her attention to the other end of the ravine. It lasted a little longer than the first one, and now she could see it was like the heart of a flame, wavering in a non-existent breeze. Though she'd never seen one before, and her father had insisted they weren't real, Merida knew exactly what she was looking at.

"Will o'the wisp," she murmured, and took a step toward it.

A branch snapped beneath her foot, and she expected the wisp to disappear. But it didn't. Instead, it burred, sounding much like the laugh of a child, and beckoned.

Merida hesitated, then looked back at Angus, who shook his enormous head in displeasure. But who was he, a horse, to tell Merida what to do? She had heard once, while sitting in her mother's lap, that wisps would lead you to your fate-and wasn't just what she was looking for?

Merida turned away from Angus and moved to the wisp, which danced just out of reach. It led her up and out of the ravine, through a patch of forest that she thought she knew. Beyond the trees she saw a hill, and atop the hill, a circle of standing stones. They were familiar, and impossibly old-relics of an age long past, left to be forgotten except by those who still practiced the Old Ways.

"Here?" Merida asked the wisp, though she did not expect an answer. But as she tore her eyes away from the stones, she saw that the wisp was gone, leaving her alone on the edge of the hill.

With nothing else to go on, Merida climbed up the hill. Reaching the top, she was alarmed by the sight of a hole in the ground-and a rather sizeable one at that. It was as if something had smashed into the earth from on high, but what in the world could it have been?

Studying the misplaced dirt, she discovered smaller indents leading away from it. Footprints!

Crouching, she allowed her tracking skills (learned from her father, much to her mother's dismay) to take over. One was definitely a human footprint-a right boot, not very deep. There was no matching left print, but she recognized the squarish, shallow hole left by a peg leg. Her father left a very similar track wherever he went-but these were far too small and light to be his.

The second set proved to be a more difficult mystery. A four legged beast, to be sure, with claws and a heavy body dragging along behind. She would have guessed, from the paws, that it was a bear-but no bear dragged itself along the ground, or hung about with humans.

Cautious now, Merida pulled her bow from her back, and notched an arrow as she followed the trail down the opposite side of the hill and into the trees. Here, the prints sunk deeper into the mud as whoever had left them crushed branches and leaves in their path. The animal, or whatever it was, proved to be quite heavy, while the one-legged person was light.

Merida, of course, left no sign of her own passage-but knew that she was now quite alone, without even Angus to hear her if she needed help. Not letting that discourage her, she continued, until the intertwining branches above blocked out the sun and she found herself in a murky, twilight afternoon. Nearby, she could hear the gurgle of a river-and a voice.

It was not the chirping call of the wisp, but distinctly human. Too far away for her to understand what it said, Merida followed the voice, climbing over an outcropping of moss-covered rock to find the river she had heard, and a boy splashing noisily through it.

He certainly wasn't a very impressive young man, even from this far away. Skinny and pale, he seemed like he was trying to catch fish with his bare hands, and failing. As he raised his feet to try and maneuver around the rocks, Merida could see that his left one didn't have a proper foot-instead, a flash of metal confirmed that he was the human she'd been tracking.

Where, then, was the beast?

Both trails ended by the water, and she doubted it would have strayed very far from its companion. The boy was no one she recognized, and his clothes were quite strange-though he was small, he still might be a threat. She couldn't see whether or not he was armed; edging higher up on her perch, she disturbed a few pebbles, sending them down into the water with a loud \_ker-plunk\_.

Merida froze as the boy looked up, calling out, "Toothless?"

What did that mean? She didn't have a chance to ask, however, as the boy realized that she wasn't who he was looking for, and cried out. Looking around, he seemed to be looking for an escape route, or a weapon, but she wouldn't give him the chance.

"Don't move!" Merida shouted, bringing her bow up, leveling the arrow at the boy's chest. He obeyed, his eyes going wide, but they weren't looking at her. He was staring over her shoulder; Merida sensed rather than saw something shift in the forest at her back, and whirled to face the huge shape coming at her from between the trees.

As it reached the light closer to the river, she saw the beast for what it was. Black as night and as heavy as an ox, she saw the shine of its claws and the flash of its teeth as she scrambled backward, trying to flee. It was something out of her father's stories, huge and dangerous and horribly real. The peace of the forest erupted with her scream.

"\_Dragon!\_"

## Chapter Three

\_Well, this seems awfully familiar\_, Hiccup thought dryly.

"\_Dragon!\_"

Toothless snarled, and the girl fired. Her arrow whistled past, quicker than sight, but Toothless had already leapt over her head, crashing down into the shallow stream beside Hiccup. He no longer attacked humans—at least not unless they attacked him first.

The girl remained on her perch, another arrow at the ready, though she didn't shoot. She was staring at them both with wide eyes, her brows coming together as she watched Hiccup sidle to stand before his friend. She seemed to be piecing something together, but whether or not she was pleased by the conclusion, Hiccup had no way of knowing.

"I am Merida, of DunBroch," her voice rang out, commanding and clear. Even the forest seemed to fall silent at her words. "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

Merida's heart was racing, and her hands shook, but she wouldn't let it show. The sight of the dragon had terrified her more than anything—but it wasn't big enough to be Mor'du. It hadn't even tried to attack her; Mor'du was a creature of destruction, and if it had been him, she would have been dead.

In fact, this dragon did not appear to behave as it should. The boy stood before it protectively, though he was obviously no match for Merida, or even a strong breeze. They were allies, but what kind of person allied themselves with dragons, and where did they come from?

Hiccup swallowed, unnerved. The girl spoke with an accent, but her name and her hair and all he had learned from the more warlike Viking tribes made him realize that they were very, very far from home. They were stranded in Scotland, and if this girl realized where he'd come from, she wouldn't be the least bit happy.

The boy raised both of his hands in a placating gesture, stepping forward a bit before answering. "Hi, Merida," he said, trying to sound as friendly as possible. He'd long discovered that it was easier to talk to dragons than to people, but right now, their lives depended on him not saying something stupid. "I'm Hiccup. And this," he indicated the dragon, who crouched behind him, asymmetrical tail waving back and forth pensively. "Is Toothless."

Merida's shaking ceased, and she had to fight back a laugh. Those names were ridiculous—the boy and the dragon definitely weren't from around here.

"What are you doing here?" She repeated, as firm as before.

The boy hesitated, looking over his shoulder at his companion. Then, he answered, "We're... lost. We need your help."

\_Help? \_Facing a dragon with enough strength to snap her neck with a

single blow, Merida should have been the one calling for help. But it hadn't, and the boy seemed harmless enough.

She lowered her bow slowly, remembering the wisps. Had this been the fate they'd been leading her to? But what could that mean, and what was she supposed to do now that she had found them?

Hiccup's shoulders sagged with relief as the girl shouldered her weapons and scrambled down the rock toward them. Toothless sat on his haunches beside the stream, and Hiccup waded over to stand beside him, the chill of the water seeping his boot. Merida was not much more graceful, splashing haphazardly and not seeming to mind the mud that leeches into the bottom of her dress. She slowed when she grew closer, circling around Toothless curiously.

At last, she asked wryly, "\_My \_help? What exactly do you think I can do for you?"

Hiccup shifted from foot to peg foot, knowing very well that he had little to offer in exchange for assistance. He would have to rely on this girl's kindness-and the kindness of her people-to get home safe and sound. It wasn't going to be easy.

"Well," he began, then cringed, feeling a sharp pain in the pit of his stomach. At the same time, a loud growl sounded from his gut, embarrassing evidence of his unsuccessful hunt for breakfast.

As Toothless sniffed, Hiccup grimaced. To his great alarm, Merida drew an arrow, and smiled.

\* \* \*

><p>Morning waxed into afternoon, and still Elinor could find no trace of her daughter. It didn't surprise her, of course-but it was still irritating. The Queen already had enough to do without keeping track of Merida every minute of the day, and worried at a hangnail as she paced through the kitchen. All around her, stews bubbled, crusts crisped, food dried and pans fried at the more than capable hands of the castle's staff. As they weaved and bobbed out of the Queen's way, it became increasingly clear to Elinor that she was not needed, so she escaped out into the Great Hall.<p>

Here, burly village men were sawing and hammering away, building large tables to host their guests when they arrived-reminding Elinor just how direly she needed Merida to return. Quickly, the Queen left the unbearable noise behind and stepped out into the courtyard, watching a crow pass overhead and sighing.

Across the open space, she saw her husband emerge from the castle's chapel, accompanied by a few of his men. They appeared as jolly as ever, clapping each other on the back and joking, though they were quick to disperse as Elinor began to approach.

"Fergus," she began. "Have you seen Merida? Her dress needs some letting out but I don't know how much, and the boys all need new boots before tomorrow-"

The Bear King chortled, resting his hands on Elinor's shoulders. "Love, the boys got boots yesterday, d'you remember?"



Elinor hadn't-she'd become so busy that everything was blurring together. "Oh," she said, blinking. "Oh, yes. I quite remember."

Fergus leaned down and planted a kiss on her forehead, his whiskers tickling. "Elinor, you need relax. Ye'll work yourself to death, and then the four clans will \_really \_be lost."

She couldn't help but smile, though it wasn't at all dignified or Queenly. "Only because you'd never stop to ask for directions."

"That's my girl," Fergus grinned. "What say you come with me, out in the fields we're pitching tents, but you know they'd put the food on next to the stables if ye aren't there to say otherwise."

Elinor put a hand to her chest and laughed lightly. "I think I might do that. Honestly, Fergus, what would you do without me?"

\* \* \*

><p>The sun filtered down between the trees on either side of the stream, setting the water glimmering. It was green and bright and peaceful-but Merida had to admit that it all seemed rather bizarre.<p>

She'd found Angus and brought him to join Hiccup and Toothless beside the stream as she caught their lunch: firing arrows into the river to snag fish had impressed both dragon and boy. Apples had provided a crisp, sweet desert, and the water was cool and clear. It was a typical lunch for Merida, on the days she spent out on her own. But now, she discovered that she quite liked sharing it with somebody else, though Hiccup wasn't much for conversation. So far she had managed to learn that he and his dragon were stranded and unable to get back to wherever they'd come from.

"So, how'd you get here?" Merida had probed, using an arrow to pierce an apple and hold it over their small fire.

"Uh, flew. We flew," Hiccup answered. Toothless, laying behind him, flapped his wings, setting the trees rustling.

"And you can't just fly back?" Merida had watched the dragon's wingspan stretch without bothering to hide her awe.

"Well, no," Hiccup smiled nervously. "It's not that easy. See, Toothless's tail, it's not... It's like..." Unable to find the words, he only pointed to where the tail in question curled out before them. Its single fin waved idly. "We can't fly with him like that. I built one, but it was lost when we crashed. I just need the supplies, and a little time, and I can make another, and then we'd be good to go."

Merida nodded, biting thoughtfully into her apple. "How'd he get like that in the first place?"

Hiccup winced. What could he tell her? That his village-his \_Viking \_village-had been at war with dragons for as long as he could remember, up until very recently, and he'd been the one to bring it all to an end? Somehow he didn't think she'd be very

impressed.

"It's a long story," he finally said, hoping she wouldn't push it.

She frowned at him, but didn't ask any more. "But all ye need from me is the stuff to put your beastie back together?"

He nodded, and Merida sighed. This wasn't nearly as interesting or exciting as she'd hoped, and wondered if the wisps had simply lead her to the wrong place. That could happen, right? She'd have to find them again and give it another try.

"Alright," she said, flicking her arrow to dislodge the remains of her lunch.

Hiccup's heart soared with gratitude. "Oh, thank you, Merida!" He ran a hand through his hair, already beginning to make calculations in his head. "You're a life saver, really, you don't know what this means--"

Suddenly, he found the pointy end of the arrow a hand's breadth from his face, and Merida's fierce scowl cut his celebration short. "But before I do that, you've got to go back to the circle and fix that hole you made."

Circle? Hiccup wracked his brain to try and think of just what he'd accidentally destroyed recently.

"You mean those big rocks, on the hill?" He asked at last.

"They're not just rocks," Merida said sharply. "They're sacred."

Hiccup was pretty sure a rock was just a rock, but before he could say so, Merida continued, "They're older than anything, and they're very important. They mind the balance of things. If we don't take care of it, something terrible might happen."

It was the absolute conviction in her voice that stopped Hiccup's objection. What was he to ride on her idea? Especially if she was his only hope to get home?

"Alright, alright," he said, arms raised once again as she continued to shake her arrow at him. "We'll fix the hole. We're sorry."

He looked at Toothless, who did not look at all apologetic. In fact, the dragon was fast asleep.

\* \* \*

><p>After waking Toothless and hiking back to the hill, they filled in the hole and patted it down until the sacred site at last met Merida's satisfaction. As the boy and dragon worked, she wandered between the other stones, gazing into the forest, hoping that the wisps would reappear. However, when they didn't, she had no choice but to act on her promise and lead her companions toward Castle DunBroch.<p>

They marched in silence, with Merida and Angus in the front, Hiccup

and Toothless following closely behind. The boy and his dragon looked around them in wonder; with their bellies full and their situation secured, they had time to admire the wild woods. Hiccup began to notice that there were more standing stones scattered among the trees, and beneath layers of moss and lichen, they appeared to be decorated with carvings.

Soon, they found the trail leading back toward civilization, climbing up a slope until they reached the edge of the forest. Hiccup sucked in his breath as he took in the sight of a great stone construction, quite unlike the Viking halls and wooden houses he was used to. It sat on a cliff, overlooking a wide, hill-hugged bay. On the slopes leading up to it was a village that looked abuzz with activity, and in one open field, people were clearing the ground and pitching tents.

Merida groaned. The lords, she thought. She'd completely forgotten! Or, at least, had tried to forget. But here it was-everyone was getting ready for their arrival, and she was no closer to getting out of an arranged marriage than she had been yesterday.

"What is it?" Hiccup asked, looking at her sideways.

"Nothing," she lied. Then, nodding to Toothless, she added, "It's just that, he can't come with us. My Da will try to kill him faster than you can say sheideadh e na h-adharcan de ghobhar."

Hiccup wasn't sure he'd ever be able to say it, but he wasn't too surprised by the instructions. Dragons didn't seem to common around here, and he wouldn't dare risk Toothless's safety.

"I'm sorry, bud," he said, scratching Toothless under the chin as the dragon pressed his head into Hiccup's chest. "I'll be back tomorrow, I promise."

The dragon wasn't pleased, laying down on his stomach to watch as they crested the hill and continued on toward the castle. Merida walked like a man headed to the gallows, Angus wickering occasionally to try and lend some cheer. Hiccup didn't have any idea what had suddenly come over his new friend, and so followed quietly. He was now preoccupied with his own thoughts, anyway. It wouldn't take him long to make a new fin to get Toothless flight-ready again, but once he did, would they be able to find their way home again? They'd have to deal with that when they came to it, of course, but for now, Hiccup was just glad he wouldn't have to sleep in a cave again tonight. He hoped.

## 5. Chapter Four

### Chapter Four

The pair had trudged up toward the castle proper, Merida scowling at the ground as Hiccup looked around with curiosity. The people here were strong and sturdy, he noticed, bustling and busy, preparing for what, he didn't know. He tried to catch bits and pieces of their conversations, but they spoke so strangely that his efforts were in vain.

As they walked through the village, he tried to ask Merida about what

was going on. "Some lords are comin'," she answered vaguely.

Hiccup winced. While arriving in the midst of this land's politics hadn't exactly been his intention, it certainly was very bad timing.

"Oh. Uh," he tried to laugh. "Sounds like a party."

"Not really," Merida replied flatly.

She made no sign of turning off into one of the homes or smaller paths coming off of the main road, instead leading Hiccup over an ancient stone bridge and under the castle's main gate. The mud of the courtyard was a mess of wheeltracks and footprints, the air thick with smoke from the kitchens, and the familiar sting of brine-filled barrels as they were rolled out and loaded onto wagons. Merida paused, her grip on Angus's reins tightening as she tried to decide the best course to take to avoid anyone's notice.

"\_Merida!\_"

Too late. Maudie's shrill call rang out over the yard, the strain in her voice evident as she approached from the direction of the keep. She held two of the triplets in her arms, the third clinging to her ankle and slowing her down enough for Merida to escape.

"I'll be right there, Maudie!" She shouted in reply, waving and gesturing frantically toward the stables.

A perplexed Hiccup followed, looking over his shoulder as the woman called Maudie cried out in distress. Merida didn't seem to notice, however, leading her steed into the stable's musty warmth. As she pulled off Angus's tack and began to fork hay into his stall, Hiccup cast an uneasy glance outside.

"Hey, if this is a bad time, I can go," he began, and Merida's head jerked up, her eyes wide in surprise. It was as if she'd quite forgotten he was there.

"Eh? No," she said absently. "It's not a bad time, not at all."

Hiccup didn't quite believe her, but before he could say anything else, Maudie's stocky silhouette appeared in the stable's entrance.

"My lady, \_please\_," she panted. "Your mother is in need of you, and the kitchens are in need of me." She held out the two giggling tots she held, who then leapt into Merida's arms, leaving no hope of escape. The third triplet finally released his nursemaid and stared up at Hiccup, who did his best not to make eye contact.

"Yes, Maudie," Merida sighed, balancing a boy on each hip. The older woman picked up her skirts and trotted out of the stable, and Merida turned to her unfortunate companion.

"Harris," she said sharply. The tiniest redhead was crouched, staring at Hiccup's metal leg with fascination, but started at the sound of his name. Merida added, more gently, "Boys, this is Hiccup. Hiccup, this is Harris, Hamish, and Hubert. My brothers."

It was obvious that the three of them were related, but before Hiccup had time to get their names straight, he found one of them climbing up his clothes with all the speed and grace of a Terror. Merida looked on, laughing, as Harris scrambled to sit on Hiccup's shoulders-clearly her friend didn't have any siblings of his own, or else he would have known to hold still instead of waving his arms in a panicked attempt to keep his balance.

"Settled?" She asked Harris, who nodded. Hiccup, however, was frozen in place, his shoulders hunched and his face contorted with fear as he tried not to drop this surprise passenger. He could handle dragons, bloodthirsty Viking warriors, explosive eggs, and deadly storms, but his accumulated hours of experience with children added up to a solid zero. To his dismay, Merida didn't offer any advice before bidding her horse good-bye and heading back out into the yard. Hiccup had no choice but to follow, wincing as Harris tugged on his hair and bounced precariously on his perch.

Merida entered the keep, tossing her hair and trying to look more confident than she felt. She was still determined to change her mother's mind, but that was easier said than done. Her behavior had probably not helped her chances much, but she was home now, and maybe her mother would be in a more listening mood. Glancing sidelong at Hiccup, she knew she still had to keep the promise she'd made him-and maybe, just maybe, he might be able to help her out in return.

But that would have to wait. The odd bunch made their way through the corridors and into the Great Hall, which had been properly cleaned up and decorated since the mess it had been that morning. Three enormous tables were laid across the width of the room, with a fourth set in front of them, set already for the family's dinner that night. Clan DunBroch's banners hung from the walls, illuminated by several torches and the blazing fireplace. Overall, it was a very grand effect, and Hiccup felt a peculiar sneaking dread.

It appeared as though the ally he'd found in this strange, and potentially hostile, new place was sort of important, which was not at all conducive to his plan of laying low.

Merida's parents were already waiting for them, seated beside each other on the long side of the table. To the girl's surprise, her mother didn't have a pile of scrolls set in front of her, and actually seemed quite content. She was even holding Fergus's hand, a gesture of public affection that her children didn't often see. It gave Merida a bit of hope, though the peace of the moment was ruined when the boys dropped to the floor and raced to their usual places on the bench in front of the King and Queen. They were greeted by a shout of delight from their father, and a gentle scolding from their mother. Merida could only dream of being showed such mercy.

"Merida, where have you been?" Elinor demanded once her attention had reached her wayward daughter. She moved to her feet, the lines tight around her mouth with anger. However, she glanced at Hiccup standing anxiously beside Merida, and paused.

The princess seized her opportunity. "Mother, Father, this is Hiccup." Despite his groan of protest, Merida seized Hiccup's arm and dragged him forward. His metal foot clicked on the stone floor as he presented his unimpressive self to the King and Queen's critical

gaze.

"I found him," Merida continued, sounding again like a younger, cheerier version of herself, having dragged home a new pet for her mother to chase out of the castle. "He's lost, and he needs our help."

Hiccup gibbered. "Well, I wouldn't say lost," he looked back and forth between the two adults, and trying very hard to wish himself somewhere else. "Just a little turned around, you know, but you guys are busy, so I guess I'll just be going..." Merida's painful grip on his arm, however, discouraged any escape.

Merida's father could give Stoick a run for his money in the "huge and intimidating" department. His judging gaze ran over Hiccup's slight frame much the way Stoick's used to, but more with confusion than disappointment. Finally, he spoke, pointing to Hiccup's metal limb.

"Ey, what happened to your leg, boy?"

Hiccup was too surprised to lie. "Dragon attack," he blurted out.

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then the older man roared with laughter.

"Me too!" He shouted, coming around the table to show off a wooden peg leg, ornately carved with odd patterns and snarling faces. Whatever test he'd just put the boy through, Hiccup had clearly passed with flying colors; clapping his hands together, the King turned back to his Queen and asked, "C'mon, love, can't he just stay for dinner?"

Pleading faces besieged Elinor, and she was too polite to refuse. "Of course," she said with a strained smile. "Please, make yourself at home, Hiccup."

Merida dragged him into the chair at one end of the table before prancing to the other. She knew her mother wouldn't dare discuss sensitive topics like marriage in front of a guest, and mentally patted herself on the back for a job well done. She could tell Elinor wasn't happy-while she was all politeness and smiles, her movements were stiff and her tone clipped, mannerisms that only her daughter could detect.

Servants appeared with platters of food, setting a new place before Hiccup without question. He was unaccustomed to being served, and sat awkwardly, mumbling a thank-you as each plate of unfamiliar cuisine was set before him. He'd thought Viking food was hardy-\_this \_stuff looked like it had been carved out of stone. The only people at the table who shared his hesitation were the triplets, who seemed more inclined to play with their food than eat it while their parents made polite conversations between bites.

"Where is it that you're from, Hiccup?" Said the woman, her brown eyes regarding him coolly.

"Uh," he replied, reaching out to pick up one of several goblets in front of him, his throat suddenly dry. Taking a swallow, he

discovered it was filled with spiced wine, and nearly choked.

"Brinian," Merida answered for him quickly. She knew he definitely wasn't from any land that her people knew of, but it was better to lie than to risk any harm befalling him because he was an outsider. The name she'd tossed out belonged to a village far north of their kingdom, in a cluster of islands probably beyond her father's awareness.

Apparently, it was not beyond her mother's. "Brinian? My, you're far from home." She took a swallow of her own wine. "What brings you here to the lands of the four clans?"

Hiccup licked his lips. The wine had left a strange burning in the back of his throat-it wasn't something they had all that often back home, and he didn't know if he liked it. "Just passing through," he answered with a nervous shrug. "I'm trying to get home, actually. As quickly as possible."

The triplets did not hide their disappointment, and Merida scowled into her soup. Elinor arched a brow.

"Is that so? Perhaps our dear Lord Macintosh will be able to help you. He lives at Inverness, and might be able to assist you on your journey."

The mention of Lord Macintosh jerked Merida up in her seat, her eyes wide with horror.

"He'll be arriving tomorrow, along with the other lords," Elinor had turned her head to speak to Merida now, leaving Hiccup very confused. "They'll be here for a few days, but we hope that the business of their visit will be settled \_quickly\_."

Her mother's cold, heartless tone shot through Merida; she'd never seen her mother this angry before. Even Fergus glanced sidelong at his wife, surprised.

Hiccup tried to speak through the uncomfortable tension. "I don't want to inconvenience anyone, really."

"He only just got here, Ma!" Merida protested loudly, desperately. Her mother looked at her quizzically, but Fergus interjected.

"She's right, dear, won't ye let the boy have a rest first? He's just skin and bone. Then we'll figure out what to do with him."

'The boy' sat back in his seat, giving up. He'd just have to try and fix up Toothless's saddle quickly before Merida's family became too eager to help him. Merida herself didn't look too keen on helping him at all-she was sulking, dipping her spoon into her now-cold food and not eating a bite.

The topic of Hiccup settled, Elinor focused on her daughter. "Merida, dear, don't play with your food."

Merida didn't show any signs of having heard her mother. She was hunched over her bowl, her face hidden behind a tangle of red hair.

"And sit up. A princess does not slouch at her dinner."

Another splutter at the far end of the table finally coaxed Merida to look back up; across from her, Hiccup was coughing into the crook of his arm, meeting her eye with an almost accusatory glare. Already hurt and humiliated, Merida gave him a small, wane smile and shrugged.

\_Princess\_. Hiccup was flabbergasted. There were no such things as princesses among Vikings, but he paid attention to what they learned about the other people of the world they encountered-and a princess was somebody who was usually very important, because their father had to be a King: and a King was very, \_very \_important. The King was like the chief among chiefs, with the power to command whole tribes of people. People that, historically, didn't get along with Hiccup's people.

So he \_really \_had to watch himself.

"Excuse me," he said, trying to stand as gracefully as he could manage. The wooden bench scraped against the stone floor, apparently determined to betray him. "I have to... I've got to..."

"Down the hall, to the left," Fergus offered helpfully, though Hiccup hardly heard him. The boy sprinted down they way they had entered earlier, throwing himself out into the night air in a mumbling panic.

It was like when Stoick had first learned of his friendship with Toothless-everything was going terribly wrong, and only by putting all his eggs in one basket had he managed to salvage the situation. But now he didn't even have any baskets, or eggs, or the help of his friends to get him out of here. Marooned in a decidedly hostile foreign land, at the mercy of a King that could probably break him in half if he'd wanted to, Hiccup wanted nothing more than to run back out into the forest where Toothless was waiting. The dragon had always been a reassuring presence during Hiccup's darkest hours, and now was relying on him to get them both home in one piece.

\* \* \*

><p>Once supper had been cleared away and the triplets tucked into bed, Elinor made her way up to her own chambers, feeling the weariness of the day like lead in her limbs. Once she closed the door to the room she shared with her husband, she at last allowed herself to sigh in exhaustion, though she never once lost her regal bearing.<p>

There was so much happening all at once that the Queen could hardly organize her own thoughts. Had they set up enough tents for all three Lords and their men to stay in? Would they have enough food to feed their guests, as well as keep themselves healthy in the winter? She still needed to fit Merida for that dress she was to wear-and had the boys gotten their new boots yet?

She heard Fergus's heavy steps in the corridor as her husband returned from his prayers. He was respectfully quiet as he entered, coming to stand beside her as she surveyed a tapestry on the wall.



"What's the matter, love?" He asked finally, drawing an arm about her shoulder and bringing her down to sit on the bed. Again, the Queen sighed, her eyes on the far wall as she tried to find words for her thoughts.

She couldn't quite find them, so instead spoke of something easier, more palpable. "It's that Hiccup boy, I don't know if I trust him."

This worry only seemed to amuse Fergus, which was not entirely helpful. "Trust him? Trust him for what? He's just a lad."

"Yes, a lad," Elinor spoke the word as if it was a hero's fatal flaw. "A lad that just spent the entire with our soon-to-be-betrothed daughter. What will the Lords think?"

"Ach, who cares what those old men think. They can barely see past their own noses," Fergus tried to reassure her with his usual jolly gusto. "Anyway, I think a friend would be a good thing for Merida. She doesn't have many, y'know."

"She doesn't need many," Elinor said, but as soon as the words came out of her mouth, she knew they sounded ridiculous. "She has me. And you, and the boys."

"But fer how much longer?" Fergus was somber now. "Those Lords and their sons will be here, and she'll meet the person she's meant to marry. Someday she'll stop bein' our daughter and start bein' somebody's wife."

It was a sobering thought indeed, one that had been troubling Elinor since the day Merida had been born. It brought on joy, sadness, and fear in equal measure; those feelings had only intensified now that the long-fated day had nearly arrived.

"Ye've done everything you can. You're a fine mother. And a fine Queen." Fergus said, a chuckle creeping back into his voice. He leaned over and kissed his wife's forehead. She finally leaned into his arm, replying,

"I only hope that she'll be ready."

Fergus's whiskers tickled as he shook his head with laughter. "Ah, love, are we ever ready to face our fates?"

It was a question that Elinor truly didn't know the answer to, and as she thought of her daughter, she closed her eyes and answered, "We can try."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN<strong>: Brinian is a village located on the Orkney Islands. I don't know if it was actually around during the eleventh century. During the twelfth century, however, there was a clan Mackintosh located at Inverness Castle. Like I did with Anything, I am trying to find real-life history to reflect in this story, but at the same time I'm gonna mess around with it to suit my needs.

## 6. Chapter Five

**\*\*AN\*\***: Thanks to your reviews, it's pretty obvious that my readers know more about medieval European history than I do. I really need to brush up.

A real source of concern for me is the characterizations of Merida and Elinor. Unlike Tangled, I've only seen Brave twice, and I didn't love it, not by a long shot. My interpretations here of the two main characters have probably strayed quite a bit-a big thing I'm aiming for is to make Elinor more likable and sympathetic, and to emphasize Merida's flaws in the hope that their growth will be more profound/obvious than it was in the movie.

\* \* \*

### ><p>Chapter Five<p>

A warm southerly stirred the few masts and sails at rest in Berk's small cove, the wood creaking and ropes rattling. There were not many ships docked-most were out fishing, since it took a lot of work to feed a village full of Vikings and dragons. For Astrid, who had been assigned pickling duty that day, it was going to be a relatively easy afternoon, and she took her time strolling through the village toward the storage hall where a smelly pile of fish waited.

Behind her was Stormfly's reassuring footsteps, the heavy Nadder sniffing at the morning air with her usual sharp acuity. All around them, the village was hard at work: there was the ringing of metal on metal from Gobber's smithy, and the sawing of logs out in the woods. Astrid took care to step out of the way as a handful of Vikings marched past, carrying the frame of a new ship to be completed nearer to the water.

As the village's main thoroughfare widened, she spotted a familiar, stocky fellow student wobbling out of his house, yawning. She frowned, knowing that Fishlegs's late-waking habits were not exactly ideal, but as she neared, she saw the signs of sleeplessness and worry on his face. Her frown deepened.

"Astrid," he said as she approached, and she nodded.

"Everything alright?"

"Yeah, I guess." He looked uneasy, which was not unusual for Fishlegs. His gaze roved over the rooftops of Berk. "I'm just worried."

He didn't have to say about what. Astrid crossed her arms and said, "Don't be, Fishlegs. They're fine."

The youth looked sidelong at her. "How can you be so calm when your boyfriend's gone missing?"

"Hiccup's not my boyfriend," Astrid replied firmly. "And it's not like he's alone. Toothless will look out for him. They'll be back soon."

Fishlegs's doubt was evident, but he said no more. Since the storm that had separated them had passed, he'd been the most anxious of all

of the young Vikings while waiting for Hiccup's return. Astrid had gotten over her initial worry-sure, it would be terrible if they didn't make it back, but Berk had lost Vikings before, and their lives had always gone on.

But while she was comfortable scowling at Fishlegs, she made sure to keep quiet around Hiccup's father. Stoick hadn't flinched when Hiccup and Toothless went missing, and continued his chief duties as if nothing had changed. However, no one had complained when he'd instructed for one of the giant braziers standing on columns in the village to remain lit and tended overnight, just in case.

\* \* \*

><p>When Hiccup first felt himself waking, he realized how disturbingly quiet it was. Where was Toothless? He tended to jump on the roof or bust down the doors on the mornings that Hiccup slept in-but as the lad sat up squinted against the light streaming in through the window, he remembered he hadn't fallen asleep in his own bed. The entire room around him was strange, and it took him a few groggy moments to piece it together.<p>

Merida's parents-the \_King \_and \_Queen\_-had been kind enough to put him up in a guest room in the castle. The walls were hung with old tapestries, and the curtains on the bed had been a bit musty, but it had been made cozy by a fire and a pile of books on the bedside table. The fire had died down in the night, and the books had proven rather unreadable to Hiccup, though he'd quite enjoyed their illustrations. They were obviously priceless works, stamped with gold leaf and colored ink, their covers decorated with knotted vines and crosses.

Stretching to get the blood flowing back to his chilled limbs, Hiccup paused, detecting a bit of movement at the end of his bed. A curl of orange hair peeked over the carved footboard, followed by a pair of wide eyes. It was one of Merida's brothers-and where there was one, the other two wouldn't be far.

With a squeal, one dropped from where he'd been climbing on the bed curtains and into Hiccup's lap. The third shot out from under the bed and raced out of the open door, the others quickly following. The sounds of the castle coming to life-and the smell of breakfast-finally coaxed Hiccup out of bed and into the corridor.

He nearly walked right into Merida, who had apparently taken it upon herself to wake him, not knowing that her brothers had already done the job. They both jumped in surprise, Hiccup backing away warily.

"Sorry!" They both said quickly, Hiccup hesitating before adding, "Your highness."

Merida's frown was immediate. "Don't call me that."

Hiccup balked. "But I should. Shouldn't I? I mean, you're a princess. That's what princesses are called."

As quick to change as the sea, Merida's scowl transformed into an apologetic smile. "I was going to tell you," she began, meaning to make up for the day before. "It's not like it's important or

anything."

"You say that," Hiccup said dryly, "But something tells me your mom thinks otherwise."

Merida rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, that's my mom, not \_me\_."

Hiccup raised his hands in surrender. "Listen, I don't want to get involved in your guys' business." Now, it was his turn to look apologetic. "And I \_really\_ \_have\_ to get home. I'm sorry."

Merida sighed. Perhaps it'd been too much to pin her hopes on this scrawny lad-without his dragon by his side, he didn't really amount to much, did he? Beckoning for Hiccup to follow, she lead him down the corridors and stairs to the courtyard, which was once again abuzz with activity. The lords' imminent arrivals had stirred everyone into frenzied productivity, though Merida felt like her body was made of lead.

"The smithy is over there," she pointed to a column of smoke rising from the other side of one of the castle's buildings, and Hiccup could hear the tell-tale ringing of hammers against metal. "Tell him I sent you, and he should give ye what you need."

Hiccup could tell by her critical gaze that she didn't think he'd even be able to lift a hammer, much less swing one. He didn't mind. "Thanks, Merida," he offered his hand to shake. "Good luck out there today."

He didn't know how much she needed it. Gripping Hiccup's hand and giving it a firm tug, Merida tried to smile. "You too."

\* \* \*

><p>Not much later, it was Elinor who was wishing silently for a bit of luck as she tried to wrestle her daughter into a dress that was some inches too small.<p>

"This wouldn't have happened if you'd been home for your fitting," the Queen chided as Merida winced and waddled back and forth.

"I can't \_breathe\_," the girl pleaded, and Elinor waved a hand dismissively.

"Och, ye don't need to. You look beautiful."

The dress was made of a shining cloth the same color as Merida's fierce eyes, though today they seemed rather dim. As Elinor tried to coax the princess's curls beneath a white wimple, she tried to think of something to say to cheer her up again.

But what was there to say? That it wasn't really that bad? That being auctioned off to the highest bidder really wasn't the worst fate in the world?

Elinor's swallowed a lump in her throat. Her only daughter stood before the window, standing as still as a frightened deer, sunlight streaming in through the window over her shoulder. In the distance, silhouetted against the sky was Beinn Mor, a black, brooding presence

that sent chills down Elinor's spine. She would never rest until her children were out from under its deadly shadow.

"Merida," Elinor returned her gaze to her daughter, who looked up at her hopefully. A single lock of bright hair had escaped her head covering, and Elinor reached out to smooth it back in. That settled, she gripped Merida's shoulders, struggling to speak. Hadn't it been only yesterday when her child had been no more than a toddler, struggling to see over the table while seated in her mother's lap? Making her first stitches of embroidery with an uneasy, nervous hand? And taking her first shots with that blasted bow and arrow Fergus had given her-though Merida was never nervous with it now. How was it that she could risk life and limb without batting an eye, but sitting before an assembly of noblemen seemed too much to bear?

"Just... Just remember to smile," the Queen finally said, the only piece of advice that she could think would sooth her daughter's nerves. Evidently, it failed; Merida's shoulders sagged and her gaze went to the ground. Elinor's heart sank, but she could do no more. The blasts of horns outside signaled that the lords had been spotted, and she would be needed downstairs to make sure everything ran smoothly.

"Come along, Merida," she said, and the pair made their way to the castle's Great Hall. The tables had been set against the walls for the time being, with DunBroch's finest men assembled in two lines between the door and the raised dais. They were righting themselves as Elinor and Merida passed between them, doing their best to impress their beloved Queen. At the throne, Fergus was doing his best to get the boys to sit still, which they refused to do until they had spotted their mother. Surprised at his apparent victory, Fergus turned around, nearly jumping out of his skin as he struggled to recognize his daughter.

"Yer beautiful," he said quickly, trying to cover up his obvious shock. Merida wasn't fooled, however, stomping to her seat on the King's left and scowling. Her lone curl had come loose again, but Elinor was too busy trying to assemble some sort of order in the Hall to fix it.

"Places, everyone," she called out. Fergus had decided to line the Hall with his most prized kills, the stuffed bodies of animals threatening to tip over as people bumped and pushed them aside. It was a hectic scramble until another blast from the horns sounded just beyond the doors. Taking her seat, Elinor waved her hands, indicating that the guardsmen open up the and allow their long-awaited guests inside.

Merida, despite her mother's urgent whispers, refused to sit up straight or even attempt a smile. As the lords and their sons-her potential future husbands-paraded around in front of her, she let her thoughts wander to all of the things she would rather be doing; of all the things she'd been doing, up until today. Activities that would no doubt come to an end if these lords were anything like her mother. Their children were so far unimpressive, and she was not looking forward to watching them perform during the contests for her hand. Her father and mother might think that the young Macintosh, MacGuffin, and Dingwall had potential, but there was no doubt in Merida's mind that she could blow them out of the water, at least when it came to riding, and most definitely archery.

Perhaps she'd have to show them.

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup had been relieved to find that Merida was right-simply saying that he'd been sent by the princess had convinced the blacksmith to let him have run of the shop, no questions asked. It puzzled Hiccup how much Merida seemed to resent her royal title, but at the same time, didn't mind pulling rank.<p>

It felt good to be back among the bellows and metalwork again. Briefly, he wondered how Gobber was getting along without him, and made himself laugh-probably fine, if not better, than when Hiccup was actually around. Well, he'd be back to Berk soon, since the construction of a fin for Toothless wouldn't take him long at all. It wouldn't be perfect, just enough to get them home.

It took him only a few moments to sketch the rough design. The leather was easy to find and cut into the proper shapes, but metal ribs were another story-like the first time, he had to melt down scraps and shape them into what he needed. He was still sweating at the bellows when the third blast from the horns called the blacksmith out to join his people in the festivities in the fields. Hiccup stayed behind, hoping that Toothless was staying clear of the edge of the woods and out of sight.

Hiccup stood outside of the smithy, waiting for the iron rods to cool, as the last of the procession of party-goers passed by. He raised a hand to wipe sweat from his brow when he felt a breeze of movement at his side; startled, he looked around, feeling at his belt for the paper bearing his drawings, but it had disappeared.

Standing a few feet in front of him was one of Merida's brothers-just how long had he been there, exactly? In his little hand he clutched Hiccup's sketches, studying them with the peculiar, blank-faced intensity characteristic to children. The dragon rider's heart sank as he realized there were doodles of Toothless all over it. What if Hamish-or Harris, or whichever this triplet was-discovered his secret? Would he tell his parents and doom Toothless?

To Hiccup's surprise, the tot held up the drawing and pointed to it, then to himself, his expression questioning. It took Hiccup a moment to decipher the kid's silence.

"You want to... keep it?" The younger boy nodded vigorously, and Hiccup shrugged. He didn't necessarily need the drawings any more, now that he was nearly done, but he couldn't imagine what Merida's little brother could want with it. "Sure, uh, I guess."

The redhead's tiny mouth grinned wide, and he stuffed the paper into his shirt. From across the small yard that separated the smithy from the castle's wall, they both heard a sharp whistle. It was the other two brothers, waving urgently. Strangely, one clutched Merida's bow, and the other, her quiver of arrows. Before Hiccup could ask what they were up to, they were off and running out of sight.

\* \* \*

><p>Merida did not consider for a moment that she might have been

making a grave mistake. The only thought in her head when her brothers brought her bow and arrows was joy. She was going to show them-the lords, her mother, everyone-she was going to show them that she wasn't just going to accept these wretched betrothals demurely and quietly, like a lady should. She was going to show them that she was the only one who was going to decide her fate.<p>

It felt good to have her bow in her hands, to feel the leather of the grip beneath calloused fingers, much more natural than a lyre or embroidery hoop. It felt even better to rip that ridiculous cowl off of her head and tear the seams on her dress, even as the people watching gasped in horror.

Now she strode along the archery range, passing by her suitors as they gaped. She'd watched their pathetic attempts to hit their targets, mere child's play compared to what she could do. Despite her mother's shouted demands to stop, Merida was firing her own arrows into the targets, hitting a perfect bulls-eye each time. Only when she reached the end of the range did she finally halt and turn, watching her mother stride toward her, face white with rage.

The Queen seized her daughter's elbow, dragging her through a sea of silent faces and away from the fields and tents. Only when the crowd was far behind did they hear Fergus trying to stir up a round of cheers.

"What an arm on that lass, eh? But what're ye all standing around waiting fer? We got a whole 'nother round of games to begin!"

Elinor, however, was deadly quiet.

"This is the last time," she said, almost too softly to hear as they marched up the bridge toward the castle. "This is the \_last \_time you humiliate us, Merida."

Merida cried out in pain. Her mother's hand was a vice from which the princess could not escape, and her body was cold with fear. She knew she'd crossed the line. What was her mother going to do to her now?

They reached the empty courtyard of Castle DunBroch, and Merida was at last released. Elinor's voice echoed off of the walls as she shouted her fury.

"How dare you shame the lords in front of their own people! Do you know what you've \_done?\_" She gestured toward the gate. "They could refuse the betrothal now. They could break with us, and everything I-your father-have worked for will have been for nothing!"

Merida's eyes burned with tears. "I don't care! I don't care about the betrothals, or the lords! I don't want any of this!"

Elinor stared, livid. "This isn't about what \_you \_want, Merida. This is about responsibility, sacrifice-"

"And you'd know all about \_that\_, wouldn't you, Ma?" Merida snapped. "Bossing me around, telling me what to do-what do you know about sacrifi-!"

The sound of a harsh slap rang out along the courtyard, followed by a shocked silence. Merida lifted a hand to her cheek, pale but for the bright red outline where she'd been struck. Elinor, too, seemed frozen in place, her hand still upraised. She couldn't seem to believe what she'd done-but her horror was quickly replaced by her usual calm, made terrible by her anger.

"You have \_no idea \_what I've done for you," Elinor's voice was barely above a whisper. "But I can see for myself that you're not ready for marriage. You're not ready to grow up and accept the weight of a kingdom. And I don't know if you ever will be."

Reaching out, Elinor snatched the bow Merida still held in her hand. Merida jumped to take it back, but the Queen pushed her away. Fearing another slap, Merida flinched. Her mother's gaze seemed to have no love or forgiveness in it; heartbroken, the girl turned and fled.

## 7. Chapter Six

### Chapter Six

The mud gave sickeningly beneath Merida's feet, making her stumble and slip. She could barely see through her tears, but knew the castle so well that she could have found her way to the stables on a moonless, starless night. It was while she rounded a corner that she collided with an unexpected obstacle and cried out, fearing that it might have been her mother.

But it was only Hiccup, sent sprawling with the force of their crash. The strange metal and leather construction that he was carrying clattered to the ground.

Having kept her balance, Merida was still standing, wiping furiously at her face and trying to mask her distress. She was suddenly mortified to be caught bawling her eyes out by the boy who rode on dragons-it was hardly impressive, and definitely not intimidating. It was too late, however-he could see her shaking, and heard her sobs.

"Merida!" Hiccup was alarmed by the ferocious girl's abrupt about-face in composure. What could have happened to shake her so badly? He got back to his feet, gathering up his crude tailfin. "What happened? Are you alright?"

It took Merida several moments to be able to speak again. "N-no. I mean, yes, I mean..." She looked down at her ruined dress and wrung her hands together.

Hiccup swallowed, glancing around. The castle was still quiet, meaning they were alone. "Did you and your mom..?"

Merida nodded sharply, once. "Yeah. I think I really..." She raised a hand to her cheek, which was cool now, but she replayed the stinging slap over and over in her mind. "I really messed up this time, Hiccup. I've never seen her so angry before."

The dragonrider felt a pang of empathy, remembering the fight with his father that had very nearly cost Hiccup everything. But



everything had worked out in the end, and he wanted to offer Merida the same assurance.

"I'm sure it's gonna be okay..."

"It's not!" Merida shouted, hugging herself. "I've really done it now. Her, the clans, everyone. I've never \_seen \_her so angry."

Her ragged breathing was all they heard for several moments as Hiccup tried to convince himself that what he was about to do \_wasn't\_ a terrible idea. Reaching out, he gave Merida's shoulder a squeeze.

"Come on. Let me show you something."

\* \* \*

><p>Toothless's joy was boundless when Hiccup affixed his new tailfin. Though it was rough, it would have to do to get them home. But before they left, they had a debt to pay, and Hiccup was going to show Merida his thanks.<p>

The princess was shaking with a mixture of excitement and fear. As she and Hiccup had left the castle and journeyed into the woods, she'd explained the reason for the lords' visit and her mother's painstaking preparations. They'd come for Merida's hand in marriage, and she pulled no punches in explaining how much she hated them for it. Hiccup had been sympathetic but quiet, saying that a dragon ride always helped him clear his head, and maybe it would help her, too.

Merida doubted it, but wasn't going to pass up a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Hiccup beckoned her forward as he checked the straps of the saddle, allowing the girl and dragon to measure each other up. Toothless seemed ready to allow her on board, however, his great eyes sliding closed as she scratched under his chin.

Hiccup mounted first, then patted the bit of seat left behind him. It was nothing like mounting a horse-Toothless was lower to the ground, and had a pair of wings in the way. It took Merida several attempts to find a comfortable, balanced position, gripping Hiccup's shoulders as he warned her to hold on.

Toothless was eager to get off the ground, galloping between the trees as the two teenagers clung to his back. It was not long before the sea of trees broke, opening onto the sky. With a snap, the dragon's wings unfurled, and he leapt up; powerful downward strokes drove the ground away, the wind catching them like the sail of a ship and carrying them away.

Merida screamed, as delighted as she was terrified. Her stomach seemed to have dropped out, like she'd stepped on a stair that gave beneath her feet. As the trees receded, she imagined that all of her earthly cares stayed with them. The rolling grass took on the shapes of the hills she could always see from her bedroom window, but seeing them from above made them somehow new. Even Beinn Mor, shrouded in low-hanging clouds, looked smaller and less ominous.

She was finally somewhere that her mother couldn't reach her. Nor the lords, or their sons, or the wisps or any force of fate. Though she

couldn't see the castle on its perch at the loch's cliffs, she imagined what the people would think if they could see her now: riding on a fierce dragon, laughing, defiant, and \_free\_.

As Hiccup listened to Merida shout gleefully, he urged Toothless higher. The wild land spilled out before them, the brooding forest broken by the occasional curious standing stones and ruins. A bitter wind snatched at their clothes and they were soon soaked through, but Hiccup wanted to take his time in calming his newfound friend. Besides, it had been some time since he'd been able to show off-dragon riding was no longer a novelty in Berk, after all.

When Toothless began to coast farther inland, Merida had fallen silent, thoughtful. Finally, she asked, "Hiccup, why can't it just be like this forever?"

"Like what?" He replied, though he knew exactly what she was about to get at.

Her next words were quiet and desperate. "I want to leave. Right now. Take me with you, Hiccup."

The boy knew she'd ask, and knew that he'd have to refuse. He sighed. "I can't do that, Merida."

"But why \_not\_?" Her hurt was sharp, and her fingers tightened on the leather of Hiccup's harness. "You don't know what it's like, living for their expectations! I can't be me, I can't show them-"

"\_I\_ don't know what it's like?" Hiccup's laugh cut her off; she was surprised by the sarcasm in his tone. "Trust me, Merida. I know what it's like to try to live up to impossible expectations, more than you can guess."

Her answering silence invited Hiccup to explain further. Bracing himself and speaking over the wind, Hiccup continued:

"See, my people haven't always been riding dragons. In fact, before I came along, we spent a lot of time trying to kill them. My dad, our chief, always wanted me to be up there with the best of them, but I never really had any of those oh-so-charming Viking sensibilities."

He paused, realizing he'd said that terrible V word. Behind him, he felt Merida stiffen.

"You're a-"

"\_Yeah\_," Hiccup said quickly. "But not a good one. I'm not big, or strong, or brave. I wanted to make my dad proud, but I couldn't fight dragons the same way everyone else could. But then I met Toothless-and, well, that changed everything."

Merida didn't seem too distraught by the truth of her friend's origins. "What happened?"

"My dad nearly disowned me," Hiccup could laugh to think of it now, though at the time it had been the worst hours of his young life. "I wanted to run away, and I almost lost everything. But I showed him that Vikings and dragons could be friends, and could work together to

survive." He decided that explaining the whole giant-evil-dragon-in-a-mountain would overcomplicate his story, and ended it simply, "And, well, the rest is history."

He nudged Toothless, steering the dragon around and back toward the loch. They would need to land soon and allow Merida to return to face her mother. She was thoughtful now, and he hoped she'd listened to what he'd been trying to say.

"If it counts for anything," she finally said. "I think you're very brave for going against your father like that."

Hiccup felt himself flush, embarrassed but pleased. At the time, it had felt more foolish than anything. "Thanks. And I know that you're brave," he licked his lips, hoping he didn't sound too much like some old-fashioned parable. "And that's why I can't let you run away either."

He could tell that this answer was not what Merida wanted to hear; she pressed her forehead against his back and groaned with frustration.

"But I could be a Viking. I'd be a really great Viking."

Hiccup tried to keep from grinning. "Yeah."

They both fell quiet once more, Toothless's rhythmic wingbeats the only sound accompanying their flight. As the moments passed and the loch loomed nearer, Hiccup began to wonder if Merida had fallen asleep when he felt her sit up and cry out.

"Look!"

She pointed somewhere in the distance, though Hiccup didn't see what had excited her.

"Huh?"

"There it is again!" She was pressed up against his back now, waving frantically to their left.

Hiccup craned his neck around, and thought he saw the strange ball lightning he'd witnessed when he and Toothless had crashed. It was a flash of blue just out of the corner of his eye.

\_Wisps! \_Merida nearly fell to her death in her excitement. Perhaps the fates hadn't completely abandoned her! And to think she'd almost let Hiccup convince her to stay and mind her mother-but now the wisps were back, and perhaps they would lead her to a solution more to her liking.

"Follow those lights!" She ordered as more of the blue balls appeared ahead. Hiccup shouted out in alarm and confusion.

"What \_is \_that?"

Despite Hiccup's protests, Toothless dove after the lights, straightening out just enough to skim the top of the forest. The wind roared in their ears, but under it, Merida swore she could hear a tinkling sort of laughter, like the tiniest sort of bells. It both

mocked and welcomed her, and she was powerless to resist its call.

Hiccup, however, wasn't so keen. "Merida, wait! \_Toothless\_" But neither dragon nor princess seemed to be listening; with a suddenness that surprised them all, the forest and the hills dropped away, and they were flying over the choppy waters of Loch Na Keal. The lights seemed to be leading them down toward the rocky beaches at the bottom of the cliffs, and Toothless was flying so fast it seemed like they would be smashed to pieces on the ground.

Then, the trail of lights vanished as abruptly as it had appeared. Toothless, now apparently free of whatever strange power had guiding him, stretched his wings as far as they would go in an attempt to slow. It worked, mostly; his feet and underbelly smashed into the beach, and they slid several yards before they at last came to a halt.

Once the world had stopped spinning, Hiccup fell from the saddle. "Toothless!" He shouted in dismay. Though he was scratched up, his dear dragon was only stunned by the graceless landing. Merida, however, was still in thrall to the promise that the wisps had proposed.

She scrambled away from Hiccup and Toothless, toward an outcropping that would grant her a better view of the beach. Where had the wisps gone? Where was the destiny that they were leading her to? A boat, perhaps, or maybe some treasure she could use to buy her way somewhere far?

She was disappointed when she reached the zenith of the rocks and found herself staring at yet more empty beach. Or nearly empty-a woman stooped at the mouth of an estuary, where an underground river poured out of the cliffs and into the sea. She was surrounded by brightly wet clothes left to dry on flat, sun-warmed stones, and was bent to beat the water from a dark green dress.

As Merida looked closer, she realized that the woman was not bent to her task-she was, in fact, impossibly hunched and ancient. Necklaces and bracelets made of strangely shaped white beads clacked as the old woman moved, and she sang to herself an almost unearthly melody. Darting between the rocks was a crow, its glossy black feathers flashing as it picked at the drying clothes. While it was probably the most mundane thing Merida had witnessed in the last few days, it was somewhat unnerving. The old woman evoked the same sort of mystery that the wisps had, and the eeriness of the standing stones. Not to mention she seemed as old as the world itself, and might be blown to dust in too strong a breeze.

Once he'd been assured of Toothless's health, Hiccup moved on to Merida. He climbed up after her, calling her name; she turned as quick as an eyeblink and slapped a hand over his mouth.

"Shhh!" She hissed, then jerked her head to the far side of the rock. Quiet now, Hiccup peered over the stone, but found nothing extraordinary about the old washer-woman.

"What is it?" He whispered, watching the crow flit back and forth. It seemed like it was trying to drag the clean clothes into the mud, but the crone was surprisingly quick in shooing it away.

Merida was absorbed in the scene, her lips pressed together and her knuckles white where they gripped the rock they hid behind. "I think that old woman..." She breathed, hardly daring to believe it. "I think she's the Bean-Nighe."

The title-or was it a name?-was completely lost on Hiccup. "The what?"

The princess put a finger to her lips and glared. "The Bean-Nighe. She grants wishes, if you can catch 'er." The wisps hadn't led her astray this time! Here would be a real solution-she could wish for the Bean-Nighe to change her mother's mind, or to send the lords back where they came from. She could even wish to have never been born as a princess, but as a common girl, free to do as she pleased without any of her parents' outrageous expectations.

Giddy, Merida motioned for Hiccup to stay as she watched the old woman turn her back to their hiding spot. Perfect! If she was careful, she'd be able to sneak up on the Bean-Nighe, and catch her. Naturally, that was the only way to force the old faerie to grant her a wish...

"What? Merida!" Hiccup protested. "What if it's just some old woman, doing her laundry? You can't just jump out and grab her-"

"But she isn't!" Merida retorted. "My mother told me all about these things, and I think I could tell the difference between a faerie and a regular woman!"

They both jumped as the woman in question called out to them:

"Are ye going to sit and argue there all day, or is there somethin' ye want from me?"

Guiltily, Merida and Hiccup stood to see the old woman regarding them sternly, arms akimbo, from her place beside the water. The crow was now perched on her shoulder, a length of fine gold ribbon trailing from its beak.

The pair made their shuffling way down the rocks and approached the old woman with caution. Merida had expected her to disappear if she discovered them, but since she had it, she knew she had to be doubly careful. A faerie could be dangerous if it wanted to be, especially if it felt wronged by a human. All Hiccup wanted was to keep the woman from seeing Toothless and dropping dead from a heart attack.

The woman examined them with one cloudy, overlarge eye, the other hampered by a permanent squint. Her face was even better evidence of her age, wrinkled almost beyond recognition and weathered like the cliffs that surrounded them. Sparse white hair hung limply from under a ragged wimple, and her dress seemed to be made up of a decaying patchwork of several garments. Though her skirts and sleeves were wet and rolled-up out of the way, she didn't appear affected by the cold, a fact that Merida envied.

"Sorry to disturb you, ma'am," Hiccup said first. "We were just leaving."

Merida's brows came together, but he cut her off, whispering harshly, "Look at what you're doing, Merida! You were about to tackle some old woman and make her grant you some wishes!"

"This could be my only chance!" Merida snapped back. "I could change my fate!"

"What was I just telling you?" Hiccup resisted the urge to grab the redhead and shake her. "You can't run away from your problems!"

The old woman clapped her hands together, her expression annoyed. "If you're quite done? Are you here for wishes or aren't you?"

They're both mad, Hiccup concluded, crossing his arms and taking a step back. Merida stuck her tongue out at him and moved closer to the crone.

"I am, ma'am. I want to change my fate."

The woman appeared to be giving it much thought, scratching her chin with curving, sharp nails. "Yer fate, eh? To what else do ye have in mind?"

Merida hesitated. She didn't think she'd actually have a say in her new destiny-in fact, she'd believed the Bean-Nighe to be more mysterious and less smelly.

"I just need you to change my mother's mind about my marriage," she said slowly, knowing that she'd have to take the utmost care in dealing with a creature of the magical realm. "I want it to be the furthest thing from her mind."

"Easy enough," the crone smirked-or at least it looked like a smirk, though her jaw seemed to be set at a bad angle. "Now what will ye offer me in payment?"

"Name your price," Merida told her, lightheaded once again. This was it! This was actually going to work!

"Since it is a spell on yer dear mama, bring me somethin' o' hers. Th' most valuable thing she owns." The crone nodded once, forbidding any argument.

"Done," Merida replied. Which, it was. She already knew her mother's most precious possession, though finding it would be another story.

The crone's lone good eye winked. "Wunnerful. Bring it to the top o' yer highest tower there, princess, and my dear Bran will fetch it from ye."

The crow on her shoulder called hoarsely, ruffling its feathers out of place. Merida nodded eagerly.

"Thank you much, ma'am." She even mustered the best curtsy she could perform, but the Bean-Nighe had already returned to her washing and ignored her. Merida picked her way back to Hiccup, who wore a sour expression.

"What?" Merida demanded.

"Nothing," Hiccup replied. "Let's just get out of here."

"Aye, we don't have a moment to lose."

Hiccup looked at her dubiously over his shoulder as they rounded the rocks to where Toothless waited. "You're not seriously thinking that she's really going to grant your wish?"

"O' course," Merida said. equally incredulous. "Wouldn't you?"

"No!" Hiccup threw his hands up in exasperation. "Because stuff like wishes and magic and bean-witches aren't \_real!\_"

"Not \_real?\_" Merida shouted back. "What do you call that, then?" She gestured behind her, back toward the water; the witch, the crow, and the clothes had vanished.

Hiccup was stunned, looking wildly about for the crone. "What? Where-"

"Ha!" Merida barked humorlessly, shoving past him. "That's your problem, Hiccup. You don't want to think that there's things in this world that ye don't understand."

The boy stood a few moments more on the rocky beach, opening and closing his mouth as he tried to think of a response. But the princess was right; he didn't understand, and for the first time in his life, he was faced with a problem he didn't know how to solve.

## 8. Chapter Seven

**\*\*AN\*\*:** I enjoy reading everyone's suggestions and guesses pertaining to the story and where it's going, but believe me when I say I've had everything planned since the beginning.

\* \* \*

### ><p>Chapter Seven<p>

It was nightfall when Merida and Hiccup returned to the castle; the clouds had gone, leaving the stars to twinkle and mirror the myriad of torches that flickered on the ground. Search parties had been sent into the forest to look for the wayward princess, and a pair of guards had been stationed at the gate, assigned to seize Merida the moment she returned to DunBroch. They were unaware, however, that their quarry would swoop down at them from the sky. Silent as a shadow, Hiccup steered Toothless to land on the castle's tallest tower.

"Bran's Tower," Merida explained quietly once they landed. "It was built when I was just a bairn, in the memory of my father's best friend."

The tower's top was flat, accessible by a single wooden door laid in its roof. There was room enough for the pair of teenagers and their dragon friend, who tucked in his wings as Merida crouched between the crenellations and observed the patrol of guards below. She saw that

her parents had enlisted the help of the other lords' men to find her, and thought she spotted Young Lord MacGuffin making the rounds.

"What happened to him?" Hiccup asked as Merida moved away from the edge. He helped her open the heavy door as quietly as possible, and a wave of stale air wafted up from the dark passage. They could only see a handful of stairs leading down into blackness.

Merida took a cautious step, the aging wood groaning but not yet giving away. She groped along the cold walls and found an unlit torch, passing it up to Hiccup who held it in front of Toothless's nose. The dragon belched flame, and they had a light.

"I don't quite remember it," Merida said as Hiccup returned the torch to her and followed her into the tower's depths. He shut the door behind them carefully, a rim of light leaking in around its edges. "But my Da always told it that Bran went to climb Beinn Mor to kill Mor'du once and for all. But we don't know if he ever succeeded—we never saw him again."

Cobwebs clung between the beams of the wooden stairs, stirring as the pair made their way down into a room that spanned the entirety of the tower. It was bitterly cold, a single window facing the loch letting in the smell of salty sea air. Dust rose in billows around their feet.

"But there's another version of the story that my Ma hates," Merida continued. "She'd have skinned the kitchen girls if she knew I heard them talkin' about it." Raising the torch, Merida illuminated the circular room: it looked like it had become a storage room, rolled-up tapestries piled at one end, and casks lined against a wall. Several chests of varying size also filled the room, and she moved between them, made quick by the thought of the witch's request. "It was that Bran saw my Ma bathin' in the sea during one of the old rituals. She was so furious... she turned him into a crow and banished him forever." Peeking over the top of one crate, she added wryly, "After I heard that, I used to be afraid that she'd turn \_me \_into a crow. But I got over it."

Hiccup watched Merida shuffle through the room, listening to her tale with mixed feelings. The day before, he would have dismissed it as ridiculous. A kid's story. But after witnessing the Bean-Nighe on the beach, he could no longer push the idea of mysterious rituals and transformations out of his mind. Instead, he focused on what he had seen and what he was sure was real—that mountain, Beinn Mor, that loomed over DunBroch like a legendary sleeping giant. Something about it seemed ominous, almost known, and he recalled that Bran had supposedly gone to climb it, \_to kill Mor'du once and for all...\_

"What's Mor'du?"

Merida gasped, having found her prize. She beckoned for Hiccup to join her in front of a mid-sized chest, the wood of it stained dark, the accents wrought of gleaming gold. He knelt and took the torch as the princess ran her fingers over the lock embedded in the chest's front.

"Mor'du's a dragon."



Hiccup's heart sank. Dragons, for certain, were real. "What \_kind \_of dragon?" He insisted.

"The most terrifying kind," Merida replied, distracted. She drew an arrow from her quiver: this one had a narrow iron head. "He's enormous, as big as Castle DunBroch, maybe bigger. As black and as quiet as death. He bit my Da's leg off."

The boy remembered Fergus's wooden leg. The king had said it had been from a dragon attack, but Hiccup hadn't put much thought into it at the time. Of course, now he wished he had, since the pieces were coming together in a terrifyingly familiar pattern. His newfound friend and her family were in grave danger.

"Is Mor'du still alive?" he asked quickly.

Merida pressed the arrowhead into the lock, her brow furrowed in concentration. "I don't know. No one's seen him since before I was born." She licked her lips. "But, sometimes... we hear things from farmers on the hills, they say that he takes their cows and horses, whole herds of 'em..."

Suddenly, she jammed the arrow into the lock so hard that it splintered the shaft. Hiccup heard the mechanisms squeak and shatter; it wasn't a very good lock, mostly for show. Hissing her victory, Merida pushed the chest open and motioned for Hiccup to raise the torch higher.

The objects in the chest were obviously cared for-they did not have any dust or cobwebs on them, and gleamed in the firelight. Reaching in, Merida lifted up humorously small pieces of clothing; she recognized her brothers' baby clothes. Beneath those, dresses that she herself had worn as a child, but she shoved them aside before Hiccup had a chance to look.

Finally, she revealed the treasure she sought. It looked like a cloak made entirely of glossy brown fur; when she touched it, it was like putting a hand in running water, it was so soft. Instantly she knew it to be sealskin, though it was of greater quality and worth than any she had ever handled before.

Hiccup, meanwhile, was too distracted to admire the cloak. The hand holding the torch was white-knuckled. An enormous dragon, living in a mountain and terrifying the surrounding countryside? It was the Red Death all over again-but Merida and her people didn't have the help of dragons to defend them. He struggled to maintain his composure, since he would be no help if he panicked. He needed to find out for sure if this Mor'du was still alive, then fly back to Berk and get back up before the dragon decided he wanted to snack on King Fergus's \_other \_leg.

"I remember this," Merida whispered, barely louder than a breath. "Watching Ma pack it away after the boys were born." The princess lifted the skin out of the chest with a kind of reverence. "She said it was her greatest treasure, but she had to hide it, keep it safe..."

Merida hugged it to herself and stood, slamming the chest closed and stirring the dust again. Hiccup jumped at the loudness of it, and

returned to the more important business at hand.

"Listen, Merida, it's important that I-that we know for sure. Or else you're going to be in very big trouble."

She wasn't listening. She made for the stairs, still clutching the fur, a grim determination set on her face.

"Merida!" She turned at the desperation in Hiccup's voice, and looked surprised by his strained expression. "Look, if we don't do something about Mor'du, you're going to have something much worse than arranged marriages to worried about."

The princess's brows came together. "What's it to \_you?\_" She snapped. "I thought you didn't care about those legends and faerie stories?" She began to stalk back up the stairs, Hiccup following quickly behind.

"It's not about \_that\_, " he said, frustrated. "Look, I \_know \_about dragons, and I know that thing in the mountain is dangerous. More dangerous than you could ever imagine. And you need \_my \_help-"

"Your help!" Merida's voice was venomous now. She had one hand on the tower's exit, but pinned Hiccup in place with eyes like ice. "Ye, you've been a great deal of help so far, tellin' me that all I've ever known ain't true and that I should do as my ma wants, like I don't have any choice in the matter!"

She threw open the door, startling Toothless, who shuffled uncomfortably when the obviously angry teenager emerged. "Well, thanks for everything, Hiccup," Merida said sharply. "But I can-and I will-help myself now, whether or not you believe I can."

Waiting for them was the crow that had been the Bean-Nighe's companion, his feathers shining in the moonlight. Its presence didn't bother Merida-the witch had, after all, told them he'd be waiting. Hiccup, however, was more disturbed than ever, the goosebumps on his arms rising from more than just the cold.

Merida approached the too-large bird, the skin draped over her arms. "All right," she said, as calmly as she would speak to another person. "This is my mother's greatest treasure. It's worth its weight in gold, more than enough payment for my wish." She could hardly believe it. Finally! She'd be free of the threat of marriage to a stranger, and could live her life as she pleased.

The crow clacked its sharp beak noisily, and the princess flinched. In a flash of movement, the crow was airborne, the skin clutched in its beak. It normally would have been impossible for a bird of that size to carry such an object, but it was no ordinary bird. Merida watched the crow sweep over the buildings of the castle and into the night, refusing to wonder if she hadn't, after all, been mistaken.

Below them, shouts rang out. The men had seen the torch that Hiccup still held, and were pointing up at them.

Merida cursed, glaring at Hiccup as though she thought he'd done it on purpose. He hadn't, but was somewhat glad they'd been spotted. Now

that her people knew she was back home, maybe they could keep Merida from doing anything else crazy.

The only problem was Toothless—he couldn't be found by the people of DunBroch, or else he'd be killed. The boy turned to his dragon friend and urged him to flee.

Toothless growled low in his throat. Hiccup could tell that he was growing impatient; the fin was repaired, so why didn't they just leave? It would be easy to abandon Merida to accept the consequences of whatever insanity she was indulging in, but the looming hulk of Beinn Mor, and its dark secret, weighed on Hiccup's conscience. He could not abandon the innocent people of DunBroch to a bloodthirsty monster.

"I'm sorry, bud," Hiccup said softly. "Just... just a while longer. I promise."

Snorting his disbelief, Toothless spread his wings. He would be able to glide beyond the castle's walls without Hiccup's help, and could reach the forest on foot. The \_whoosh\_ of air from his take off put out the torch, but more were gathering in the castle's courtyard.

"Princess!" The calls of DunBroch's men reached them, a mixture of relief and fear. They were mystified by how she'd ended up on the top of an abandoned tower, accompanied by the queer boy that none of them had ever seen before. Merida waved to them, signaling that she was quite alright, and returned to the trap door to make her way into the castle.

Hiccup noted that this time, however, something was different. Instead of hanging her head like a man headed to the gallows, Merida walked with stiff pride. The dragonrider, though, felt sick to his stomach with dread.

\* \* \*

><p>If anyone had seen the old crone climbing the brooding crags of Beinn Mor, they might have offered to help her. Or, more likely, they would have encouraged her to turn back while she still had the chance. The mountain was not safe for anyone, young, old, human, or animal. The crone, however, was none of those things, and she was quite alone as she hiked through the murky twilight.<p>

By sunset she had reached the top, the sun casting her shadow against the standing stones that ringed the rocky peak. These stones, however, were really columns and the wreckage of once-proud walls that had not been seen by human eyes for hundreds of years.

The sun sank below the horizon, but the Bean-Nighe was not left without light. The blue glow of wisps ringed the ruins, dancing over her head and at her feet. She did not wait long, however, as the soft wingbeats of a crow approached from the north. The crone extended an arm, and a patch darkness fell from the sky: it was a sealskin, impossibly soft, the brown fur almost black in the odd light. The delivering crow landed on the crone's shoulder and squawked.

"That's a boy, Bran," the witch said, turning around to shuffle in among the old castle's remains. She went down a path of broken stones

until she reached a set of steps leading down into a hole. Without hesitating, she entered, and the blue wisps followed.

The underground tunnel was cavernous, the light barely reaching the walls. But carved in stone there was a strange tale, one of curses and blessings, and faerie-magic almost as old as the standing stones themselves.

The Bean-Nighe sniffed. Of course, none of them were as old as her, and she had heard of much stranger things in her day. Her raspy steps echoed along the crumbling corridor until she came to a place where the wisps would go no further.

She stopped there, and held the skin cradled in her arms. She called out into the endless dark, "Mor'du! Come to me, see what I have brought you."

There was silence for some time, and only the softest of breezes. The witch held perfectly still, and she could feel it passing back and forth, like the breath of something huge. Then, she could hear the breathing itself, followed by the rake of claws on stone. It would have driven any mortal mad with terror, but the old witch had long grown used to the horror of Mor'du.

The steps that shook the mountaintop grew closer, and soon the light of the wisps reflected off of glistening scales that still filled the tunnel with black. The crone could see herself in one huge eye, the other now a pulpy mess of scar tissue. It observed her with both interest and malice, a vengeful fury of someone or something dependent that had grown hateful of its master. The crone sensed that its true interest lay in the bundle in her arms, and with a cackle, she tossed it into the abyss.

Black, scythe-like claws snatched the skin out of the air. The wuffling intake of breath-like a hound searching for a scent, but on a gargantuan scale-proved the witch's theory. A growl of rage and hunger came soon after, and the witch saw the gleam of teeth and felt Mor'du's fire began to simmer in his belly.

"That's right," the Bean-Nighe goaded the sinister serpent. "Yer selkie dear is still down there, under yer nose, with tha' no-good husband tha' saved her and carved out yer eye."

The growl grew louder, until the echoing cacophony of snarls grew too much.

"Fly!" The witch cried, raising her gnarled hands as if in prayer. "Fly and burn them until nothing remains but ye and yer bride!"

A roar tore Beinn Mor asunder. The castle ruins crumbled and the tunnel caved in on itself, but the Bean-Nighe had already vanished. Great wings, black and batlike, spread like the angel of death from the mountaintop. With a bellow, Mor'du raised himself up and belched flame, as hot and as carefully cruel as the fires of hell.

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup had hung back when Merida reunited with her mother. Elinor's expression had been difficult to read, and like her daughter, she'd had some time to cool since their fight this

afternoon. The Queen once again found herself fraught with doubts and questioning her parenting-but of course, she could not do that before an audience.<p>

So she met Merida outside the Great Hall, ignoring Hiccup until she had decided what to do with him. For a brief few moments earlier in the day she had blamed him for her daughter's rebellion-but in retrospect the idea was almost funny. Merida would do whatever she pleased, and this odd young man had been dragged along for the ride. It was how it always had been and always would be, unless Elinor found a way to make Merida understand.

Merida herself was confident that whatever her mother did now would be negated once the witch's spell took effect. She stood before the Queen, braced for the worst-and was nearly crippled by surprise when Elinor reached out to touch her shoulder.

"Merida, where have you been?"

The princess balked. She was close enough to see that Elinor's eyes were red-rimmed from weeping, and her voice was hoarse. She kept brushing away Merida's hair and examining her for injuries, of which the girl had none.

"I was, uh..." She was too startled to come up with a lie, but Elinor didn't seem to notice.

"Oh, but you're safe, love, that's all that matters."

Elinor's hand still felt the burn of her daughter's cheek when she'd struck it. It was an act she had never thought she would commit-she had been so angry, so desperate that she was unable to think. When Merida had disappeared, Elinor's thoughts had turned to the worst. Like any mother, she imagined that she might be fishing her daughter's body out of the loch, or digging her up somewhere in the woods. Fergus had witnessed Elinor's frenzy, when she had no longer been Queen, but a mother who had lost her child.

It had taken DunBroch's strongest to keep Elinor contained.

"I can't lose ye both!" Fergus had insisted, struggling to be heard over his wife's sobs. "I'll go to the chapel, pray-"

"What good will it do!" Elinor demanded. "She needs me, Fergus. She could be hurt, she could be lost!"

Fergus had tried to maintain his calm, a feat that he could not have performed for anyone but his beloved. "She's not hurt," he 'd said softly, soothingly. "She knows those woods better than this castle. She'll be fine, dear, and home before you know it."

Now, in the twilight of the hall, Elinor allowed some of that vulnerability, that hurt, to leak through to her daughter for the very first time. It astonished them both how humanizing it was; Elinor saw that she could relate to her daughter, and Merida realized that her mother had always been trying.

"Mum..." Merida fought back tears. She was stupefied by gentleness, like a raging bull quelled by kind words.

"Merida," Elinor nodded. "I... know that you and I have never seen eye to eye. When you left this afternoon I thought-I really thought that I would never see you again. And I didn't want... that to be the last we ever saw of each other." She reached out and Merida stepped into her embrace. For the first time in many years, mother and daughter hugged.

"I don't want to lose you," Elinor continued quietly. "Not like that. Not to my temper, to danger, or to... a husband. Not yet." They released each other, and the Queen gripped Merida's shoulders gently, but firmly. "But you and I must work together now, Merida. For each other."

This was it. Her mother was standing here and telling her that she was ready to listen. That she didn't have to get married to a stranger, and that all was forgiven.

"Yes, Mum," Merida gasped out in relief. She was so happy that she forgot the witch and her wish for a moment. A moment that ended too soon.

Elinor's serene smile twisted into a grimace of pain. She cried out and stumbled backward and away from Merida, clutching her left thigh. The dress there had blackened, as if burnt, and she tore at it to get at the skin beneath. Her howls of agony echoed through the castle, and a riot of noise in the Great Hall meant that the King and his men had heard her.

Merida reach out to help her mother, but was then frozen in place by a thought. Was this it? The Bean-Nighe's spell? She had received the payment and was now enacting Merida's wish. But Merida didn't want the wish anymore! She and her mother were going to be all right!

Petrified, Merida turned to look back toward the castle's entrance, where Hiccup stood. He, too, had moved to help, but stopped. The Queen might have been beyond any mundane help now that she was in the claws of deep magic. As Merida and Hiccup stared at each other, their minds worked furiously to try and figure out how best to help her-and they both ignored the notion that it might already be too late.

## 9. Chapter Eight

**\*\*AN\*\*:** Man, I just want to get this story over and done with. There are maybe two chapters left to go, which to me makes this fic astonishingly short. The reviews I've gotten have been nothing but kind, and for that I am glad. However, I want to know, how's my pacing? Plot? Transitions? These elements are very important, and I don't want to toss them by the wayside for the sake of characterization and fanservice.

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter Eight<p>

The Queen's cries brought a panicked rush from the Great Hall. Fergus was the first to her side, only barely acknowledging Merida's return before demanding, "What happened?"

Elinor had collapsed to the floor, moaning and drained of color. Her pain was all too clear as she clutched at her leg and yet tried to hold it away from her. The dress smoked as though embers lay beneath the cloth, and Fergus tore it away without hesitation. It was an act that stopped the other Lords in their tracks; they stood in the doors to the Great Hall, the yellow light of the roaring fires spilling out around them. They stared at the unconscious Queen as the skirt of her dress ripped: the slim white thigh beneath it was red and bleeding, as if it had been branded.

"\_Maudie!\_"

Both Fergus and Merida bellowed desperately until the trusted nursemaid came. Her usually nervous demeanor vanished, and she ordered the Queen moved to her chambers. Fergus did this himself, cradling his shivering wife to his chest and carrying her through the castle. Merida followed, her tears of relief turned to fear, and Hiccup remained where he was, transfixed by helplessness.

The Lords and their men who had been feasting in the Hall now murmured among themselves, frightened by yet another unorthodox turn of events. Hiccup noticed with increasing discomfort that several of them kept glancing his way, and jumped when he felt something brush against his legs.

It was the triplets, their small mischievous faces now shockingly somber. They looked up at Hiccup forlornly, quite forgotten in the fuss. Licking his lips, the boy tried to say something reassuring.

"It's okay, guys. Your mom is going to be okay."

Hiccup was not the praying type, but at that moment, he hoped to the gods that he wasn't lying. The Queen had been fine one moment, and the next, she wasn't. Like Merida, he could only conclude that this was the result of the Bean-Nighe's spell, though he'd also considered every other possibility that his scientific mind could come up with. There weren't many.

More people approached, this time from the crowd of rowdy Lords. This time, it was three young men around Hiccup's age, though that appeared to be where their similarities ended. Each wore a different expression: the first was dark haired and had blue tattoos on his bare arms, and looked like he wanted to strangle the dragon rider. The second was extraordinarily pale even by Scottish standards, and looked like a terrified sheep caught in the path of a hungry dragon. The third hung back and was the largest of the troupe, wringing his hands anxiously.

"You," said the dark-haired one angrily, pointing an accusing finger at Hiccup. "Yer the one that's been spending so much time with the princess. The Queen told my Da that you're from up North, but yer not fooling \_me\_. You're not one of us."

The sheeplike one echoed, "Not fooling!"

Hiccup swallowed. Who were these guys? Friends of Merida's? "Look, I, uh, I don't see what that has to do with-"

"What happened to the Queen!?" Snapped the dark-haired boy. "You were

out here, what did you see?"

"I didn't see anything!" Hiccup was quickly becoming tired of people screaming at him. "She was fine, and then she wasn't. If you want answers then why don't you go ask \_Merida\_."

The other one snarled. "Yer awful familiar with Her Highness." His eyes narrowed. "What are you, t'her?"

\_Really? \_Was that what this was about? "I fail to see why that's important, considering what just happened," Hiccup replied dryly.

The boy's eyes flashed with anger, and he seized the front of Hiccup's shirt. With a depressing amount of ease, he lifted the dragon rider right up off of the floor and drew back his other hand, ready to beat him to a pulp.

Hiccup squeezed his eyes shut and thought, \_Not again. \_However, the blow he expected never came. He was back on the ground so suddenly that his bad leg gave out from under him. His assailant cried out, and when Hiccup opened his eyes again, he saw why: the triplets had leapt at him, pummeling with tiny fists and kicking with little feet, one even biting down on the boy's ear, small redheaded whirlwinds of fury. At any other time, the sight would have been hilarious, but not far away the crowd of Scotsmen had begun to sound mutinous, demanding that DunBroch's men explain what was happening. Luckily, they were too busy to notice the boys' scrapping.

It took a moment for Hiccup to remember the triplets' names to call them off. "Harris! Hubert! Uh... Hagg-Hamish! Stop!"

The little ones jumped off of their victim and stood in front of Hiccup as he got to his feet. The dark-hair boy, looking much harried, faced him with astonishment and new respect.

"\_Look\_," Hiccup began, his tone firm, like the day he'd brought his classmates to the Training Ring in order to make peace with the dragons. "Your Queen is in danger, I'm not sure how and I'm not sure why. But I'm here to help." He inhaled. "My name's Hiccup."

The trio of youths exchanged glances. "Macintosh," said the dark one, pushing the hair out of his face.

"Dingwall," said the nervous one.

The third mumbled something that sounded like, "MacGuffin."

With an uneasy truce established, the boys moved closer as Hiccup continued to speak. "Okay. I'll tell you what I can." Hopefully they wouldn't think he was crazy. "There was this old woman, a witch, I guess. And Merida... Merida made a deal with her, and I guess she put a \_curse \_on the Queen-

"Curse!?" Bleated the young Dingwall.

The word seemed to catch the mob's attention. "Curse?"

"What curse?"



"The Queen's been cursed!"

"Which one of you motherless dogs did it!?"

There was the sound of glass breaking, and there was a roar as the Scotsmen began to take out their frustrations on one another. Not wanting to get caught in the riot, Hiccup and the others fled up the stairs. The triplets stuck close to Hiccup's side, the news of the curse not helping to make them feel any better.

The ragtag group reached the second-floor landing. Now Macintosh spoke. "A curse?" His anger had returned. "And you just let Her Highness do it?"

"I didn't think curses even existed before today!" Hiccup said defensively. He still didn't want to believe. "But maybe there's something we can do..."

The others were looking over Hiccup's shoulder. He turned and saw Merida standing in a corridor, watching them with something like surprise on her face. The triplets ran to her and she encouraged them to go to the Queen's side.

She heard the fighting downstairs as she came nearer. Before she said anything, Hiccup asked, "How is she?"

Merida was despondent. "I... I don't know."

The image of her Mother-hurt, and possibly dying-in her Father's embrace would stay in her memory forever. Elinor was unconscious when Maudie stripped her of her dress, exposing the wound which had no explanation. It was clear, however, that the burn on Elinor's leg was not the only thing wrong; the Queen burned with fever, and shook with the chills.

It was entirely Merida's fault, and she knew it. Why had she been so foolish? Just moments before, it had seemed like everything was going to be all right. She wish she could take it all back...

That was it! The wish!

Her hand snaked out and she gripped Hiccup's arm with almost painful strength. "The witch! We have to find her! We can make this all stop!"

"You mean the witch that \_you \_asked to curse the Queen?" Macintosh loomed over them both. His distrust was almost palpable. "Yer own \_mother?\_"

Merida recoiled from his wrath. Up until now, the young Lords had been nothing but obstacles to her; their accusatory stares and aggressive postures were an affront to her ideas of them as vapid, misogynist villains. Now, though, they were unbearably human.

"I-I-" She gibbered, her temper flaring. "I did this because of you! I don't want to marry you, not any of you!"

They looked at her, wide-eyed, as if she'd grown an extra head. Macintosh seemed like he very much wanted to hit her. "And do you think we wanted to marry \_you?\_"

"Do you really think that's important right now?" Hiccup was getting tired of playing ambassador, but positioned himself between them, hands upraised. "Do we wanna keep fighting or do we want to do something?"

They didn't get a chance to answer. A shaking rolled in from every direction, across the hills, to the cliffs by the sea, up the stones of Castle DunBroch. It began as a low rumble but built up into a roar, a cacophony of rage and despair that rattled their very bones. The fighting downstairs became abruptly still, but the noise went on and on.

"Mother!" Merida tore down the corridor, Hiccup and the young Lords fast behind her. The bucking floor made them stumble and fall, but they made their way to the Queen's chambers. They found Fergus hunched protectively over his unconscious wife, and poor Maudie shrieking in the doorway. The triplets looked out, pale and frightened, from under the four-poster bed. One window looked out to the sea, but through the other, across the gloom of the night, they saw the black, brooding shape of Beinn Mor engulfed in flames.

"No!" Merida wailed, flying across the room to the window. She saw a dark, impossibly huge shape break from the peak and take to the sky. She couldn't believe it, she didn't want to think it was happening. Like she had done in the Great Hall, she turned, searching out Hiccup in the face of fear-blanching faces. She knew he would understand when she whispered, "\_Mor'du\_."

Though she was quiet, Fergus heard the name loud and clear. "Mor'du?" He became like a man possessed, his hair sticking out in every direction, his eyes wide and blazing. He still leaned over Elinor, but had a hand on the greatsword sheathed across his back, ready for the attack. "That devil? Is he returned?"

The shaking stopped, but another malevolent roar echoed across the Isle of Mull. Merida's thoughts raced. Why this? Why \_now?\_

Her mind went immediately to the story of how her parents had met. When they were both still young and spry, and when the people of DunBroch had still feared the sleeping dragon. Was the dragon's sudden wakefulness related to the her mother's hurt? Her wound, visible still and slathered in Maudie's healing poultices, looked very much like a burn, though the Queen had been near no flames.

Her mother had not, no. But the skin...

"He's after Mum!" Merida screamed with sudden understanding. "He's after her! She has to hide!"

Hiccup took a step back as Merida pushed past him to Elinor's other side. She was a dervish, shaking the Queen awake.

Elinor cried out in pain as soon as she was conscious. She could barely make out of her husband and daughter, though she could feel their breath on her face.

"Fergus..." The Queen groaned. By the Old Ways, her leg hurt, why did it hurt? "Merida..?"

"Mum, you have to go," Merida sobbed. "Mor'du, he's coming. He's coming for you!"

Dazed as she was, Elinor had mind enough to chide her daughter. "Merida, don't be... don't be ridiculous. Mor'du is gone..."

Another howl rocked the hills, and Maudie whimpered. The clamor of boots and armor began to come at them from down the corridor.

Elinor instantly understood. "Fergus!" She groped for her husband's hand, so much bigger than her own. At the same time, Fergus's head guardsman, joined by the older Lords Macintosh, Dingwall, and Macguffin, tried to press into the room.

"Your Majesty!"

"The dragon!"

"Fergus, what is the meaning of this!?"

"\_GET OUT!\_" The great king bellowed, so loud that the castle might have collapsed. The men tumbled away obediently, but they could hear screams of terror from the courtyard.

They did not have a moment to lose. "We must get the Queen to safety," Fergus ordered. He looked pointedly at Maudie, who gathered her courage and approached the bed. She looked to Merida for help, but the princess, quivering, stepped away.

"No," she said softly. "I... I did this. And I must make it right."

Fergus, uncomprehending, only stared at her. The young Lords, gathered wordlessly behind Hiccup, were equally astonished when she faced them.

Her words were hard to find. "I-I'm sorry," it almost pained her to say it. "I've done nothing but hurt and humiliate you. But please, please trust me. I will fix this." She clasped her hands together. "Help me. Get my mother somewhere safe."

It seemed for a moment that they would refuse. Macintosh met her eye squarely and Dingwall seemed like he would wet himself. But MacGuffin, mumbling, moved around them to stand before the Queen.

"Your Majesty," he said, and extended a hand shyly.

Elinor was watching her daughter when she spoke. "Thank you. \_Merida\_..."

The princess flinched. "Mum. I'm sorry."

Silence would not last a moment. Fergus asserted himself as High Lord and King of the Land once more. "Boys. To the lower levels. Ye'll find a tunnel in the rock, to the sea. Take her there." He'd pulled his sword free, the blade gleaming in the firelight streaming in from outside; the villages that dotted the mountainside had been reduced to burning rubble, and it would not be long before Mor'du reached the castle. "\_We \_will handle the beast."

The Lords outside the room heard that and raised a cheer, though the sincerity of their bravado was anybody's guess. Fergus charged from the room, yelling for arms and armor. The Queen's chamber was oddly quiet once he'd left as the young Lords assembled around the Queen, who wrapped herself in a simpler gown with Maudie's assistance. Her injured leg hampered her a great deal, and a different sort of pain seemed to have a hold of her entirely.

"Merida, love," she said quickly, trying to dissuade her daughter from going. "Don't do this. Don't fight him. He's a dragon, I will go to him. I only wanted you \_safe\_-"

"I know that, Mum. But I can't let you," Merida did not turn away now as Elinor stroked her hair. They embraced for what felt like the first time. "I have to do this. I have to take responsibility."

Merida took a step back and found Hiccup beside her. He looked terrified, but resigned, and she knew he would be up for the task ahead.

"Hiccup, will you and Toothless..?"

The young Viking swallowed and nodded. "Oh yeah. We've done this before."

\* \* \*

><p>Once the Queen and her entourage had begun their awkward progress into the bowels of the cliffs, accompanied by Maudie and the triplets, Merida and Hiccup raced into the castle's courtyard. There, the Bear King's men were gathering, along with the warriors that had come with the older Lords MacGuffin, Dingwall, and Macintosh. Their axes and greatswords flashed in the orange light of torches, and as the teenagers pushed through them, they saw more men on horses pulling wagons of large wooden beams out of the gates, toward the muddy fields. Tents and tournament rings were quickly torn down before the sparks of the burning forest could reach them and set them alight.<p>

Great gashes of flame bled smoke into the sky, blocking out the stars even as it reflected light onto the chaos below. More roars shook the world, but Mor'du, for the time being, was nowhere to be seen.

"Toothless!" Hiccup shouted over the clamor. He knew his dragon friend would hear him, but at the same time, feared that he wouldn't be able to respond. "\_Toothless!\_"

Merida raced to the stable. In his stall, Angus was nearly frantic, tossing his head and pawing at the dirt. The princess brought their faces close together; he immediately stilled, his big dewy eye staring wide into the girl's own ice-blue ones. She spoke to him in a whisper, confessing what she'd done. And while he didn't completely understand-he was, after all, only a horse-she knew he would forgive her.

Even with his unconditional forgiveness, she asked him one more favor.

"Go to my Da, Angus," Merida told him, passing her hand over his nose. "Help him, protect him. You can't come with me this time."

The stallion snorted rebelliously, eyes rolling at the smell of smoke on the wind. But he followed as Merida lead him out, toward the great silhouette of her father.

"Go on," she said, slapping his rump before turning to follow the sound of Hiccup's voice. He had climbed to the battlements, crying out for Toothless, but his voice was drowned out in another hill-shaking rumble.

Merida took the steps two at a time, one hand on the bow slung across her chest. She reached Hiccup in time to see a dark shape break from the trees in the distance, bounding across the fields toward the castle. It leapt over shouting Scots and answered Hiccup with its own feral scream.

"Toothless!" This time, Hiccup said it with relief. He had imagined all the horrible ways his dragon friend might have already been scorched, squished, or otherwise killed by Mor'du's onslaught. The enemy dragon in question had not yet appeared above DunBroch, however, but it was only a matter of time.

Ignoring the fright of DunBroch's men, Toothless jumped up to the top of the wall, gnashing his teeth anxiously. Hiccup threw his arms around the dragon's neck only for a moment before tossing himself in the saddle, Merida immediately behind him.

"So what's the plan?" Hiccup asked. He very much hoped there was a plan.

"Mum," Merida gasped. She was scared, more scared than she had ever been before in her life. But at the same time, she knew what she had to do. "I have to get that skin back for Mum. It's the only way to save her."

Hiccup had no choice but to trust her, and he did. Completely, despite all evidence pointing to just how untrustworthy this reckless teenage girl really was. "Uh, have any idea where it might be?"

Merida's voice quivered with fear. "I think... I think Mor'du has it."

Great. "Oh?" Hiccup's own voice cracked. "So are we just going to ask him politely to give it back? 'Excuse me, Mr. Fire Breathing Hell Dragon, there's been a mistake.'" Hiccup jerked around in his seat to face her. "Let me tell you, these kinds of dragons aren't exactly the negotiating type!"

Merida inhaled, ready to retaliate just as a small, shining black dart buzzed over the courtyard. It was almost impossible to tell what it was if not for the harsh, hoarse shriek it emitted.

Merida's sharp words died on her lips. "Follow that crow!" She yelled, and no sooner had she said it that Toothless launched into the air, his bat-like wings propelling them upward as Hiccup steered. The princess could feel boy and dragon becoming one and the same, an

unstoppable force that she was glad to have on her side.

As they rose, so too did the smoke, stinging their eyes and filling their lungs. But they did not lose sight of the crow, its black feathers flashing in front of them like a lantern left out to guide returning ships. Without a doubt, it was the same crow that had been with the Bean Nighe, and the same crow that had taken Elinor's cloak. But why now is it helping us? Merida wondered, as the castle of DunBroch disappeared behind them, and the crouching mass of Beinn Mor loomed.

## 10. Chapter Nine

### Chapter Nine

Toothless's strong, steady wingbeats kept pace with the crow. Beneath them, the hills grew taller, the forests thicker and more forbidding, but for the places that had been engulfed in flame. The fires illuminated an otherwise dark night, though the top of Beinn Mor was still shrouded in blackness. It was there that the crow was undoubtedly leading them, and as they neared, Merida saw the familiar sturdy shapes of standing stones circling its peak.

Then, with a shock, she realized they weren't standing stones at all. The crow made to land on one, and Toothless slowed to alight in the center. Now that they were close enough to touch, Merida could see that the pillars were made of mortar and rocks, rotted wooden beams stretched out between them. The strange trio stood among the ruins of a castle that had long been forgotten.

Silently, Merida slid from the dragon's back, staring open-mouthed around the crumbling walls and empty windows. The stone under her feet may have once been a courtyard, or even a hall. Any decorative banners or tapestries that might have hinted at who had lived here had long since faded away.

Hiccup also dismounted, though he kept one hand on Toothless. Like Merida, he was awestruck, but struggled with a sense of foreboding. He had the unshakable feeling that they shouldn't be there-but couldn't put into words why. So he kept quiet, flinching when the crow took off again, the flap of its feathers breaking the silence.

The crow glided from beam to beam, out of a break in the walls and into a wider space. Here, the stone floor had collapsed, meaning that the ground here was hollow. The pit yawned like the mouth of an ever-hungry beast, but Merida crept close to the edge to try and see how far down it went.

She was surprised to find a ramp, built from earth and debris, worn smooth by the passage of something large and heavy, sloping down into the emptiness. Around the rim of the hole, the stone was blackened, as if it had been burnt, and despite the obvious wear of the entire structure, no creepers or grass had dared to grow on it.

"Are you seriously thinking of going down there?" Hiccup had come up behind her, and Merida was surprised to find herself already inching down the ramp.

"I, ah, I guess so," she replied, turning to look over Hiccup's head for the crow. For what, approval? A signal of some kind? But whatever she had wanted from it would have to wait-the bird had disappeared.

Beside Hiccup, Toothless had begun to growl. It was astonishingly loud, and the boy was frightened to see his friend's nose wrinkled, his lips curled back, teeth exposed and gleaming in the starlight. Eyes affixed on the hole, Toothless was almost feral, and refused to take another step closer.

His reaction disturbed Merida, too. "What's the matter with 'im?" She asked.

"I don't know," Hiccup answered, though he actually did. Stepping toward Toothless, hands raised in a calming gesture, he said, "It's whatever's down there. He doesn't like it."

"Well, then, keep watch." Merida faced the ramp again, and without hesitating, strode down into the dark.

Hiccup watched her go, though he was running his hands over the scales of Toothless's face, trying to reassure him. The dragon's tail thumped against the ground and he gnashed his teeth, the same reaction he'd displayed on the island of the Red Death. Could it be that this place was similar-the nest of the fearsome Mor'du?

If it was, it meant that it was only a matter of time before the beast returned. They had to leave, and leave now.

"I'll be right back, bud," Hiccup whispered, then sprinted for the hole that had swallowed the princess up. "Merida!" He shouted. "Merida! We gotta go!"

He expected to be blind down below, but was surprised to find himself in a wide tunnel, the walls piled with more fallen stones and ancient, tarnished armor, all illuminated by a familiar blue glow. All things considered, that light wasn't very assuring, and he shouted out for Merida again.

Then he saw her silhouetted some distance ahead, enraptured by something on the walls. Dancing motes of blue-wisps!-surrounded her like overlarge lightning bugs. As Hiccup ran to her, he heard the noise of his own footsteps echoing farther and farther down the tunnel, seemingly into forever. But even more affecting than the sounds was the smell; down here, it was thick with the odor of dragons, musky and scorched. His theory that this was Mor'du's nest was affirmed.

"Merida," he said once he was at her side. "We need to leave before he comes back."

The princess shook her head once, then reached a shy hand to touch the wall. Following with his eyes, Hiccup saw that the entire length had been carved in intricate relief, made more dramatic by the shadows cast in the wisps' strange light. He recognized heavily armored people and the almost comical carvings of animals. Most of it was symbolic, however: forests of swords, spears, and standing stones were ringed by patterns of knots, and he couldn't see any sort of linear narrative until Merida pointed it out.

"Look," she said softly, pointing to three armed figures flanked by the towers of a castle. "They were brothers, and they were in a kingdom... This was their kingdom!" She could only mean the ruins above them. Sidling sideways, deeper in, Merida continued, the wisps keeping close. "But one of the brothers, he wanted it all for himself..."

A lone figure, a broad-shouldered man, stood with a sword in one hand and a banner in the other. On the banner was the unmistakable silhouette of a dragon.

"The Dragon King," Merida whispered, then leapt to the left, her fingers still brushing the stone. "And here, the wisps..."

It was the same figure, but surrounded by carved flames. The stone here was blackened, as if it was scorched. When Merida pulled her hand away, it was dusted with soot. Beneath the soot, the stone was webbed with cracks.

She followed them with her eyes, to where the wall had been mutilated by four long furrows. The picture that had once been carved there was now unrecognizable. The damage, however, was obvious to Hiccup: it could only have been caused by the claws of a dragon.

"We need to go," the boy urged her. In the blue light of the wisps, they were both frighteningly pale.

"I understand now," Merida turned to him, eyes wide with shock. "Hiccup, Mor'du... Mor'du was a man. This man." She pointed to the wall.

"What?" Hiccup looked up, then back to her. "No. He's a dragon, and he's going to come back and he's going to cook us for dinner if we don't leave!"

"But he did the same thing I did!" Merida's emotions were a mixture of wonder and horror; awe of the Old Ways, and shock that she and Mor'du were not so different. The ruins were ancient, meaning that Mor'du had never broken his spell. Did that mean there was no way to save her mother either?

"I have to find the cloak," Merida turned from the wall, beseeching the wisps silently. They floated from her, farther into the tunnel, where the walls and floor were so burned by dragon flame that they seemed to be made of solid blackness. She didn't notice the sealskin cloak until she almost stepped on it; it had been crumpled into a ball, stained by ash, and cruelly torn nearly in two. Seeing it was a terrible reminder of the Queen's condition, and the fact that Merida had been the one to blame. She hugged the skin to her chest and moaned.

"Oh, Mum."

Her anguish was almost palpable, down there in the dark. Oppressive and heavy, it wanted to drive her to her knees and leave her there while who knew what befell her burning kingdom.

But Hiccup was not so paralyzed. His hand on her arm brought her back to the task at hand, and they both made for the tunnel's exit. As



they climbed up toward the sky, Merida risked one last glance back, searching for the wisps. In their place, she thought she saw the glowing figure of a man, but as soon as she tried to focus on the wavering blue light, it vanished.

\* \* \*

><p>The earth-shaking roar of a dragon echoed across the hills. Orange-tinged smoke now blanketed the sky like winter clouds, though instead of snowfall, it was ash. Toothless skated over the tops of the trees, a black phantom with two terrified teenagers clinging to his back. Ahead, tents still smoldered in the game field and a line of buildings in the village had been reduced to rubble, but most of the fires had been put out. On the road leading up to DunBroch, they saw the warriors of Clan Macintosh shepherding people to shelter in the castle's ancient cellars.<p>

Merida clutched the skin tighter to herself, thinking of her mother in the tunnels beneath the cliffs. Had she made it to safety, or had her injuries proved too much to bear? The princess prayed that the skin she carried would be able to save her mother from the terrible wrath of Mor'du.

In front of her, Hiccup and Toothless kept their senses alert for any sign of the dragon. Smelling it out proved impossible--there was too much smoke in the air, blown about by a sea-borne wind, and as the roar faded, silence took its place. It had yet to show itself, but it would be a challenge for a dragon as large as this one to hide, especially when it was hunted by a Night Fury, the stealthiest dragon of all.

Following Merida's direction, Hiccup steered Toothless up and over the castle, spiraling down the cliffside toward the pebbled beaches at their feet. The loch was eerily still in comparison to the chaos raging on land, and the princess had to strain her eyes to try and see if her mother and her guardians had made it to the shoreline.

Only a small pale face, crowned with orange hair, signaled that the Queen was safe. The triplets waved from behind a large boulder that rested against the cliff face. In its shadow, Elinor huddled, wrapped in a blanket. Surrounding her protectively were the Lords' sons, their weapons gleaming in the light reflected off of the water. Merida saw them tense as Toothless made ready to land, though they relaxed some when they recognized the princess.

As soon as Toothless alighted, Merida flung herself from his back, pushing through the young men to fall to her knees at Elinor's side.

"Mum!" Her voice bounced harshly from the rocks. The boys scrambled around her, looking stricken as Elinor gazed at them. She was trembling, though from cold or pain it was hard to tell. Her face was drained of color, and the hair around her temples was damp with sweat. She reached out to Merida as if to embrace her--but at the sight of the skin, she recoiled.

"Oh, Merida!" She moaned unhappily, an expression of anguish crossing her face, unlike any Merida had ever seen before.

"I know, \_I know\_," Merida said softly, her own throat tightening with fear and remorse. "But ye have to, it's the only way you can get away-"

"I won't, Merida," Elinor cut her off, stroking her daughter's hair, her own face twisted as she fought back tears. "I won't leave you. Not ever."

Merida opened her mouth to respond, but her blood ran cold as another impossible roar tore the air. Still standing a respectful distance away on the beach, Hiccup and Toothless had their eyes to the sky, spinning in place to find the source of the noise.

It was like a thunderclap. A rush of wind buffeted the group on the beach as an enormous black shape appeared over the cliff, passing over where the castle stood. It swooped down over the water, gliding low over the silver water of the loch before veering right, blocking out the sky with its wings.

Hiccup had only seen a dragon this large once before: it had been the Red Death, an enormous, terrible beast that had very nearly put an end to everything. Mor'du, however, was more serpentine and lithe, his silhouette a fearsome display of spikes and sharp horns. Almost like a Monstrous Nightmare-but far larger. Its long tail, like the Red Death's, ended in a spiked club. Its head was so large that he could see its teeth when it opened its jaws and vomited fire into the air.

The group on the beach ducked low, though they could feel the heat through their clothes and against their faces. The rocks of the cliff face groaned and cracked, dust raining down at the force of the great dragon's passage. Toothless clawed the pebbles of the beach in fear, but still flung a wing over Hiccup protectively. As Mor'du wheeled around back over the loch, the boy threw himself into the saddle, glancing back to Merida and her mother before urging Toothless into the sky.

Merida didn't even notice when Hiccup took off; when Mor'du has flown overhead, Elinor had thrown up her bare arms with a pained, frightened cry. The thin lines of old scars showed white there against her pale skin, making Merida almost sick with fear and regret. Now, more than ever, she was determined to hide her mother where Mor'du would never reach her.

"Mum," the princess moaned, reaching her hands out to the ailing Queen. Elinor took them, too weak to resist as her daughter pulled her from the shelter of the stone and out onto the beach. The Lords' sons and the triplets followed, the former still watching the dragons in the sky.

Toothless and Hiccup needed to get Mor'du's attention somehow, but the beast was fixated on the defenseless Scots on the beach. With a clenching in his gut, Hiccup wished he had the other Hairy Hooligans at his side to help him with this fight-when it wasn't even really \_his\_ fight. Of course, he would never leave Merida and her people to die at the claws of a dragon; and it wouldn't be very Viking of him to back down from a fight.

They clawed upward; as expected, Toothless could fly faster than Mor'du, if only because he was so much smaller. But the larger dragon

didn't seem to notice them as it winged over the loch, preparing to make another pass over the beach. Beating back his fright, Hiccup tried to use his scholar's mind to figure out just how to fight the beast: did it have a shot limit? A weakness in its armor? He searched his memory, wondering if there was any such dragon in the Book back home. And as he thought, Toothless banked sharply to the left, narrowly avoiding a mid-air collision.

Mor'du did not so much as blink. It was then that Hiccup realized it only had one eye-and a potential weakness.

It was almost upon the beach again, where Merida and her mother now sat exposed. Hiccup had to act quickly, and he nudged Toothless back around. The dragon understood immediately, opening his mouth, fire burbling up from the depths of his stomach and shooting out as Mor'du prepared to make his own. Instead, the great creature snarled, the missile searing along his black-scaled flank, head snapping around to discover what had dared to attack it.

Hiccup patted Toothless's neck, urging his best friend to turn back over the loch and hoping Mor'du would follow. With a bellow of rage, the great black dragon wheeled over the cliffs, its tail smashing into the walls of ancient stone, and fell into pursuit.

\* \* \*

><p>Merida and her companions cried out as large chunks of stone rained down on them from the cliffside, young Macintosh raising his shield over the princess and queen to protect them from the worst of the deadly fall. The cold water of the sea loch now picked at Elinor's blanket, tugging at it the same way it tugged Merida's dress. The princess was in the water up to her knees, pulling Elinor after her, the sealskin draped over her shoulder. Just as before, Elinor was shaking her head.<p>

"Merida, please! You don't know what you're asking me to do!"

Overhead, the dragons screamed at each other.

"I'm askin' you to save yourself!" Merida sobbed, her throat aching from the strain of emotion and breathing smoke-filled air. "I can't let you die because of..." Her mouth was as twisted as her gut. "Because of something I did!"

Elinor's blanket fell away, pushing against her legs as she was brought further out to the water. The Lords' sons looked away, but Hubert, Harris, and Hamish looked on, their own faces red and tearful from confusion and distress. They did not understand what was happening to their mother, or what their fate would be from the terrifying dragon above.

Elinor stumbled, falling to a crouch, though she didn't seem to feel the chill. She drew her daughter to her, holding her close, and for a moment Merida imagined that her mother was as strong as she'd been when she'd been much smaller and able to crawl into her lap.

"Merida, this is not your fault," the queen's voice had become a whisper now. "You can't change what I am."

The princess choked. \_What I am. \_What her mother was, had always been, and always would be was something beyond her understanding. A part of an ancient and mystical world that Merida could never be a part of. All of the stories that Elinor had told her, the tales that Hiccup scoffed at, were true, but beyond Merida's reach.

"I will \_always \_be your mother."

It shot through them both like an arrow. With a cry, Merida held Elinor tight. At some unspoken cue, the boys threw themselves into the water, fighting the waves to cling to their mother and sister. Even as force of air from Mor'du's great wings threatened to bowl them over they clung to each other, and none could say for how long.

As the noise from the fighting dragons grew worse, they finally separated. Elinor's expression was devastated, but resigned. The triplets clung to Merida's skirt as she unfurled the skin, its brown length flapping in the wind like a flag. The gash in it looked awful, and for a moment she feared that would keep it from working. There would be only one way to find out, and with a final, shuddering sigh, she threw it around Elinor's shoulders.

One moment, the skin had been in her hands, warm and slippery. The next, it had vanished, along with her mother. She was aware of a forceful push against her legs, making her nearly fall, and a murky shape under the waves that appeared to be going farther out into deeper water.

Her brothers' quiet sniffing quickly escalated into loud, unbearable wails. Merida herself felt strangely numbed, slogging her way back to shore with two boys in her arms and a third clinging to her legs. The Lords' sons rushed forward to help her, their expressions equally awed and troubled. They weren't quite sure what to make of what they'd just seen, but they wouldn't have time to sort it out either: the shadows of dragons passed over the beach once more, and Merida turned her face skyward.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN<strong>: okay the final battle was originally gonna be just one chapter but this thing got way too long.

## 11. Chapter Ten

### Chapter Ten

"\_Hiccup!\_"

Merida's voice rang out against the cliffs, reaching Toothless's ears far quicker than his human's. The Night Fury banked left and drew in his wings, spiraling over DunBroch and back out over the loch. Looking down, Hiccup saw that the castle was all but completely evacuated; the warriors of all three clans were leading those unable to fight down the hill, away from the burning forest and toward the modest fleet of boats sheltered at the docks on the other side of a small bay.

Mor'du, unable to maneuver as lithely, continued to coast out over the water, but his whiplike tail snaked out, and he began to come back around.

Toothless continued to sink, the pebbly beach coming up fast. Merida's hair was bright even in the failing light, her pale face watching them. She held up one hand, her bow clutched in the other. The boys that had accompanied her and her mother were once again huddled up against the boulder, and the Queen was nowhere in sight.

The dragon seemed to understand what Merida wanted, even if Hiccup did not get it right away. And when he did realize that Merida intended to fight along side them, he almost yanked Toothless back up again, to lead the danger away. But one scaly ear slapped him, and Hiccup flinched away, leaning over the side with his own hand outstretched.

Toothless slowed just enough so that when the teenagers grasped hands they did not rip each others arms out of their sockets. Merida still cried out, less from pain and more from fear as she suddenly left the ground, the bottom of her stomach dropping out just as rapidly as the earth. Wind roared in her ears, and she was horrifyingly aware that it was only Hiccup's bony fingers around her forearms that kept her from plummeting into the water far below. If the palms of his hands were as slick as her own, things did not bode well.

The scream of the wind suddenly grew louder, and as Toothless climbed as quickly as he could with a second passenger dangling from his left side, Merida felt a an impossibly hot gust of air pass inches from where her feet had been. Looking down, she saw a column of belched fire and shrieked again.

"\_HICCUP!\_"

He really should have been following Snotlout's advice and work on his upper body strength. This, and other ridiculously calm thoughts crossed the young Viking's mind as he twisted in the saddle, trying to pull Merida up alongside him. Mor'du was gaining quickly, his one eye glowing menacingly in the reflection of his own fiery breath. How many shots had that been? Hiccup had forgotten to keep track.

Merida screamed a third time as Mor'du nearly overtook them, his jaws open wide as if he intended to swallow them whole. Only quick thinking on Toothless's part saved them; abruptly slamming his wings close to his sides, the Night Fury dropped like a stone.

It was Hiccup's turn to yell now, but as they fell, it was easy for him to drag Merida behind him and onto the precarious seat strapped to the dragon's back. She, in turn, snatched after the arrows that were tumbling from the quiver at her waist. It was fruitless; as the cold, hard expanse of the loch reared up to meet them, Toothless snapped his wings open again, and they sliced over the waves so quickly that Merida did not even hear the arrows splash.

Muttering oaths that her mother never knew that Fergus still said within hearing distance of his children, Merida groped desperately in her quiver to see if any had not fallen.

She had three arrows left.

Hiccup was not at all assured by the princess's muttering. Toothless would fly slower now with two people aboard, eliminating one of the advantages they'd had over their larger enemy. All they had left was their maneuverability, which had saved him in the battle with the Green Death-and Hiccup hoped he wouldn't come out of this one with less limbs than when he had started. If he came out of this one at all.

"So, you got a plan?" He shouted over his shoulder. Behind them, Mor'du was coming around again, backlit by the fires that savaged the hills of Beinn Mor. Ahead of them, the loch widened, eventually leading to the open ocean.

"I only have three arrows!" Merida yelled back. The hand that did not hold her bow was gripping Hiccup's shoulder, the tips of her fingers digging in as she tried to hang on and keep an eye on Mor'du at the same time.

"He's covered in armor! And fireproof!"

"His eye!" Merida cried out, her voice hopeful. "My Da knocked one of them out before, I can do it now!"

The princess set her teeth, letting go of Hiccup to reach into her quiver. Twisting from the waist up, she felt herself shaking, though she told herself that this was no different than shooting backwards as she and Angus galloped through the woods. Only instead of wooden targets hanging from tree branches, she was aiming for a gigantic, fire breathing demon hell bent on eating her and her friends.

Their loss of speed was telling. Like a terrifying storm cloud, Mor'du winged after them, the sound of his flight as loud as thunderclaps. Merida could barely focus, her fear of the massive beast overcoming the usual calm she felt whenever she had her bow in hand. The metal head of the arrow jumped as she lined it up against her finger.

Later, she would have sworn she saw a mocking gleam in the great dragon's eye. He did not fear her. There was contempt in his scaled face as his jaws opened wide, black teeth and tongue illuminated by a rolling glow deep in his throat. Hair whipping around her face and in her eyes, Merida was frozen in terror. She could feel the heat of it, so close that it was as if she had already been devoured.

With a cry, she loosed. At the same time, however, Hiccup steered Toothless sharply right, meaning the arrow went far off of its mark. Mor'du snarled in outrage as the smaller dragon passed over his side, flying back toward Dunbroch.

"\_Go hifreann leat!\_" Merida swore angrily. "Keep it steady!"

"I'm sorry, did you \_want \_to burnt to a crisp?" Hiccup was somewhat amazed that he still had some sarcasm left in him, though it felt like his bones had turned into jelly. Only the presence of Toothless beneath him kept him from giving over completely to his terror. But he could feel his best friend's own quick pulse and labored breathing, and knew they could not keep up these acrobatics forever.

The hills were brightly burning, the smell of destruction thick and heavy in the air, though the sulfurous stink of Mor'du was far more overpowering. The bigger dragon wheeled slowly around to follow them as Merida readied another shot.

"Stay on course now!" She demanded, shouting her throat raw to be heard over the wind. Hiccup grit his teeth, knowing that flying in a straight line would get them barbecued. Toothless did not seem keen on getting cooked today, either, and shook his head in objection. He was already weaving through the cold air above the lake, and the tension in his frame told Hiccup that his dragon wanted nothing more than to take off for home and leave this mess behind. If they could only get away from DunBroch and return to Berk, they could have help from the other Hooligans. By then, however, it would probably be too late.

If it wasn't already.

"Only a little farther, buddy," Hiccup said softly, quiet enough that only Toothless could have possibly heard. Leaning forward in the saddle, the boy looked for some path of escape. The hills were choked with smoke, and they were far too slow to flee from Mor'du over the open sea. The castle waited now, unnervingly still, on top of the cliffs.

\_The cliffs!\_

Hiccup pointed, speaking directions that only his dragon could hear. When he sat back up, he shouted over his shoulder to Merida, "Hang on!"

She barely had time to squeeze an arm around his neck before Toothless took a sharp dive, skimming the surface of the loch. Mor'du, behind them again, bellowed and winged after, the displaced air from his passage forcing white-topped waves through the water.

"What are you \_doing?\_" Merida shouted in Hiccup's ear when she saw where they were headed: full speed toward those unforgiving rocky walls.

"Just trust me!" Hiccup called back. "Trust me and shoot!"

He didn't have to ask her twice. Though not without some trepidation, Merida twisted around again to stare down the cursed creature that had hunted her mother for years-with \_her \_help. As the wretched beast gained, so did Merida's fear of failure. It made her hands unsteady and her eyes cloud with tears.

But she couldn't fail now, after all the flubbing she had done to get here. It was her failure to understand that had brought Mor'du out of hibernation. It was her failure to listen that had sent her mother back into the sea. And if she failed now, she was going to bring even more death and misery upon her people, her family, and her only two friends in the world.

The fingers on the leather grip of her bow tightened. She was not going to make this failure a habit.

Vision clearing, Merida inhaled and focused. She saw only Mor'du's

great yellow eye until it filled her sight. There was no distance between her and her target, she thought, even as she drew the arrow back and waited. The bucking flight of Toothless faded away to only the faintest rocking, like a mother cradling their baby. The wind was muted, far away.

Only Hiccup's urgent voice wormed its way into her concentration.

"Any day now!"

Merida released. And not a moment too soon. The arrow flew true, shrieking through the brief space between Toothless's tail and Mor'du's open maw, sinking into the soft, gooey eyestuff of the beast with a sickening \_squelch\_.

Mor'du screamed, this time in pain. His scaled eyelid shuttered down, snapping the arrow's wooden shaft, but the damage had been done. He flew blindly, gnashing his teeth and belching short bursts of fire. He could not see that Toothless had veered sharply upward, skating over the cliff face that loomed high and unforgiving in front of them.

Merida had not been prepared for the sudden shift in direction. She cried out, slipping from the saddle, only Hiccup's fast reflexes saving her from a gruesome plummet to the ground. He snatched her hand as he clung to the saddle with the other, Toothless flapping wildly to get away from the chaos unfolding below.

Staring past Merida's pale, frightened face and streaming hair, Hiccup watched Mor'du smash full-speed into the cliffs below DunBroch one final time. The beast's angry roars were cut off and buried beneath the sound of tons of crumbling, crashing stone as his body was flattened by momentum. Boulders exploded out into the loch and the air. Clouds of dust rose up to join the rising smoke, engulfing the bulk of DunBroch-but not so fast as to hide the sight of some outer walls giving away from the force of the impact.

\* \* \*

><p>It felt like ages, but it was only minutes later that Toothless, Hiccup, and Merida landed some distance from the castle, on the side of the bay where people had watched the battle from their too few boats. All three clans were stunned into silence, but the people of DunBroch clamored forward, questioning the safety of their princess and their queen. The triplets and their vanguard had joined them before Mor'du's defeat, the younger boys clinging to their father as the terrible tapestry had unfolded.<p>

"Merida!" King Fergus pushed through the crowd to be at his daughter's side, and the boys were not far behind. The Bear King did not spare Toothless or Hiccup any notice as he picked his daughter up with both meaty hands, studying her in a panicked frenzy for any injuries.

"Merida, oh, \_lass\_." Merida felt a strange horror at the sight of tears in her father's eyes. Her indefatigable, fearless father, was \_crying\_. And the boys did not hide their bawling when she was returned to earth, burying their faces in her skirts.



"Oh, Da. Da. I'm \_sorry\_." Merida's own face was wet. She couldn't bear to look at him, not after what she had done. "Ma is... Ma..." She couldn't say it. \_Ma is gone. \_Instead, she could only suffer to look over her shoulder, into the blackness that was the loch.

He seemed to understand, his face crumpling further with grief. The hairs of his mustache and beard were damp. What remained of the family of DunBroch clung to each other as their people hung their heads in silence.

Hiccup stood very still beside Toothless, feeling very much that it was the time to leave, but not seeing how he could slip away unnoticed. Toothless sagged and lay down where he stood, wings stretched out and quivering from exertion. Gently, Hiccup ran his hand over his dear friend's head.

"Good job, bud."

Toothless only grunted, loud enough to catch the Scots' attention. Merida's family broke apart, Merida looking as haggard as Hiccup felt, and Fergus's expression unreadable. The rest of the crowd looked frightened and wary.

The King approached, lumbering and shadowed. "Thank you, lad, for what you have done," he said, as quietly as possible for a man like King Fergus to be. "But perhaps it is best you return to wherever you came from."

Hiccup nodded emphatically, not at all inclined to disagree. It was a bit harsh of a dismissal, but the boy could not blame him, not after all that had transpired since he'd arrived.

But Merida appeared between them both. "No, Da! This was my fault. All of it." She licked dry lips. "Hiccup tried to stop me, but I wouldn't listen. If I had, maybe Ma would still be here, and I..." Looking away from her father, Merida spoke to Hiccup now. "I-I'm sorry."

The young Viking was very rarely on the receiving end of apologies, and shook his head, trying to get out of the center of attention. "No, really Merida. I wish there was more I could have done."

"Aye, but what's done is done," Fergus said impassively, all trace of the boisterous Bear King now vanished. That bode more forbiddingly than even the dark hulk of Beinn Mor in the distance. The fires whipped before a cool breeze now, the clouds coming in low and heavy with rain. "We have work to do."

At that signal, the Scots began to unload themselves from their boats, marching slowly but directly back to the village. The houses had suffered little, but as rain began to clear away the dust, it was clear that much of the west part of the castle had followed the cliff down into the bay. The body of Mor'du lay still on the beach beneath the ruins, as black as a starless slice of the night sky. Though he was quiet now, his was a terror that would not soon be forgotten.

Merida made to follow her father, then stopped to reach out to Hiccup. He shook his head and tried to smile.

"I think we'll just sit right here for a few minutes. Catch our breath." To emphasis it, he settled down beside Toothless's head, the turf feeling like the world's softest down-stuffed mattress.

"But it's going to rain," the princess protested, puzzled.

"Yeah. I'm used to it."

Merida hesitated, seeming to realize just what Hiccup intended. She would not be able to convince him otherwise. Frowning, she asked, "Will you come back?"

>Hiccup shrugged. He should say no. There was no sense in him being involved in a land so far away from Berk, even if he'd helped saved it from a gigantic, fire breathing monster. It was just something he did with alarming frequency. He'd tried to help, but it hadn't exactly panned out well for the people of DunBroch. He could hardly believe that he'd be welcomed.<p>

"Yeah. Probably."

Merida's lips flickered with a ghost of a smile. She gave him a short, sorrowful wave before turning and running down the heath-covered hill to join the sad procession of her people.

## 12. Epilogue

### Epilogue

Spring had returned to the land of DunBroch. The grey winter had been a bitter one, wet and cold enough to make reconstruction difficult. It was the sawing of wood and the shouting of workers that woke Merida in her new room in Bran's tower, which had miraculously survived the impact of Mor'du's demise. She had taken the room that had previously been used for storage because it gave her a view of the deep green loch below.

The sun was not far above the horizon when Merida sat straight up in bed, a smile already spreading across her face. She had few reasons to be glad anymore, so she leapt on them like a starving beggar whenever they presented themselves. And today promised to be something to remember.

She was dressed in a flurry, armed with her bow and quiver before she leapt down the spiral stairs to the tower's lower floor. It was there that her brothers stayed to be close to her, since their own rooms had been destroyed. They were long gone by the time she ran through, but she had little concern to spare as to their whereabouts. They would turn up eventually.

The courtyard was a flurry of activity, as it had been since the weather broke. The men of the village were working hard to restore Castle DunBroch to its former glory, rebuilding rooms that had been lost in the fight and repairing ones that had been damaged. Knowing that she would do nothing but get in the way, Merida carefully skirted the construction crews and darted into the tents that served as their temporary kitchen until a new one could be made. As subtly as she could, she filled a small lidded basket with smoked fish, sausage, and an apple. She'd need it today.

She jogged back across the yard to the stables, careful to stay out of her father's sight. Angus tossed his head at the sight of her, knocking his hooves restlessly against the door to his stall. She produced the apple and rubbed his nose soothingly.

"Sorry lad, but ye can't come out with me, not today." He was not pleased and turned his nose up at her offering. "I'll make it up to you tomorrow, I promise."

Well, he could live with that. He took the apple, and she was out the door, through the gate, and sprinting through the village so fast it was as if she had wings. She ran through the fields beyond the castle walls, where new grass was just beginning to grow. The forest rose up before her, ancient trees interspersed with new growth. Entire acres had begun to rise up out of the ashes, lending Merida a hope that she had almost thought impossible.

Figures waited for her at the edge of the wood. They were not exactly treated with hostility by the people of DunBroch, but the riders of Berk had learned to keep their distance. It would take time to win the Scots' trust, even if their princess welcomed them wholeheartedly.

Hiccup smiled softly as Merida reached the top of the hill, panting and leaning on her knees to catch her breath. Toothless pressed forward from behind him, tempted by the smell of the fish. But even more vocal beside them was Stormfly, the Deadly Nadder that Merida had met not many weeks before. She screeched and shoved her rider aside unceremoniously to get at the fish, making Merida flinch.

"\_Stormfly\_, behave yourself." Luckily, the dragon's rider was not too cautious to shove right back. Astrid scowled at her Nadder, who chirped somewhat apologetically.

"It's alright. I brought enough for everyone." Merida reached into her basket, handing off a pair of fish to the dragons before wiping her hands on her dress. "So, where do we go?"

Hiccup shrugged, a familiar, leather-bound book under one arm. "I don't know, Merida. This is your day. You lead the way."

Spring had brought more than warmer weather to DunBroch. Beinn Mor had been stilled, the forests had recovered, and something else had begun to return to the Isle of Mull:

Dragons.

None so big as Mor'du had been, of course. They were small, fleeting creatures that had evaded and confused the people of DunBroch at first. It was easy to claim that they were fairy folk come to restore order now that the cruel, dark dragon had gone. This relationship fascinated Hiccup, much to Merida's irritation. He was firmly of the school that the myths of her people could be explained by mistaken dragon sightings, though he'd witnessed astonishing miracles like the Bean Nighe and wisps for himself. He always brought his sketchbook and the Book of Dragons along on his visits, arguing with Merida about the natural order and Old Ways. Astrid had appointed herself mediator, not caring who was right but able to their skulls together hard enough to make them both shut up.

One thing they could agree on was that the dragons of Mull were often small and skittish. Though they were free-roaming in the forests, they did not come near human settlements if they could help it. That saved the people of DunBroch the grief of defending their livestock from bigger breeds, like Monstrous Nightmares and Gronkles. But it also made dragons harder to study-and catch.

Merida grinned, masking her apprehension as she marched into the forest. The two humans followed, their dragons curling up to catnap in the sun.

One thing that they immediately noticed was the hush of the wood; in winter, the trees had been leafless and as dead as death, with only the crunch of snow to signal life. Now, birds called and wildlife hustled just out of sight. The moss, twigs, and leaves gave deliciously underfoot, and Merida inhaled as deeply as she could. It felt good to be away from the castle. It felt good to be alive again.

Their path veered eastward, toward the heart of the hills, where the worst damage had been done during Mor'du's rampage. They passed several standing stones, those sentinels observing their passage like wise guardians. Their presence comforted Merida some, though Astrid gave them a cautious distance. Time did not seem to pass as they walked, hypnotized by the peace of the world around them.

Suddenly, Merida raised a hand, stilling her companions. Astrid instinctively reached for the axe she had left behind, then balled her hands into fists. Hiccup, however, tiptoed carefully forward.

"What is it?"

"Through there," Merida explained, gesturing in front of them. The trees parted to an area of emptiness that had been burnt that previous year, but was now home to a riot of grasses and vines. The remains of a lone tree stood at its center, dead and burnt out but a host to several mosses that had taken advantage of its hollow trunk. A small flock of dragons had also made their home there, and it was those creatures that the princess was after.

The three teenagers crouched and approached the meadow slowly. Hiccup had eyes only for the tree stump, waddling awkwardly as he hugged the Book of Dragons close to his chest. Astrid too could only stare out at the open ground, though her stance was more defensive. She was always prepared for a fight. Merida was all nerves, afraid to embarrass herself and fail in this mission in front of her new friends.

They waited patiently where the forest's shadow was deepest, looking out into the bright-lit grasses, using all the practice they had gained as dedicated hunters. When the sun had inched past its noontime high, they were rewarded with a hint of motion, a clattering inside the stump. A small head peeked out from the top, then retreated; but it returned shortly after, followed by a half a dozen more.

They were barely hatchlings, with heads and eyes far too big for their bodies. They were soon joined by their parents, a mating pair

barely bigger than Terrors, and the lesser individuals that also belonged to their flock. Those soon spread their wings-barely wider than the lengths of their bodies-and glided away from the tree to hunt. They were a species that Hiccup had seen before, farther north, and he signaled Merida to exercise caution. Poison Darters. And they had done well to earn the name.

She was the only one of the trio that dared to move out of their hiding spot and into the light an hour later. The hatchlings had mostly fallen to the ground by then, doing their best to learn how to glide, but their wings were far too small. Their parents chirped encouragingly as they groomed themselves and napped.

Astrid had to give Merida credit; for a girl that had barely acknowledged the presence of dragons her entire life, at least the redhead could listen to advice and exercise the proper precautions. She moved the basket from her shoulder to her arm, opening it to let the aroma of fish and sausages emanate forward, masking her human scent. She shuffled awkwardly on her knees into the grass and waited for the dragons to notice her presence.

They did so immediately. The adults stiffened, their nostrils flaring as they took in her smell on the breeze. After several silent moments, they chirped and nickered to each other, obviously discussing the best course of action to take. Merida stood still, no matter how badly her knees ached.

One of the adult Darters took it on itself to approach first. A lone branch on the trunk served as their perch, and he glided from it to a space in front of Merida, but several feet away. Its tongue peeked out, a bright pink against the green of its scales, its tiny chest heaving rapidly as it breathed. Painfully slowly, Merida reached into her basket of fish and pulled out a specimen almost as large as the Darter itself. She tossed it over, startling the critter into a hiss, but its hunger won out. The second joined it, and as they dug in, they seemed to determine her less than a threat.

At that signal, their younglings rushed forth in a rush to rival the triplets' run for forbidden sweets. Fairly experienced in such an area, Merida quickly upended her basket, allowing the little Darters to throw themselves into the pile of food instead of attacking her for it. But she snatched a small fish from the lot, holding it in her hands and waiting for one of the hatchlings to take notice. It did not take long as one, the largest of the lot, grew bored of bullying its siblings and approached her with the same slow steps its parents had.

Merida was like a stone, the fish cupped in her hand as the infant Darter wuffled against her fingers. She was not too surprised by the warm, yet pebbly texture of its snout, since she had spent time with both Toothless and Stormfly. When it crawled into the palm of her hand, it took all of her self restraint not to stand up and shout her victory-that would certainly ruin it all. But it crawled into her hands and devoured the fish, bones and all, before curling up to sleep. Stiff and aching, Merida stood, sending the rest of the flock scattering to their tree.

Looking up, she was surprised to see the sun already sinking toward the horizon. She hadn't believed she could ever be so patient. But she returned to Astrid and Hiccup, who were both standing, eager to

congratulate her on taming her first dragon. The little Darter slept through all the back-clapping and admiration, even when Merida slipped it into her basket for the journey home.

\* \* \*

><p>AN: Well thank goodness that's over. I have ideas for a sequel but I dunno if I'll follow up. Maybe if I get a Beta that can kick my ass into gear. The Poison Darters I got from the HTTYD wiki, they seem like the kind of dragon Merida could form a bond with. As for Mor'du, I based him off of the Gorghenghast.<p>

Thanks for the support, anybody and everybody. I loved all of your reviews, especially the ones who told me I made them cry. And a special shout out to Maggie296 who's gifset actually got my inspiration going again so I could finish this hot mess. (it's linked on my profile and you should go look at it okay.)

End  
file.